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CASSELL'S "RAINBOW" SERIES OF ORIGINAL NOVELS

VOL. I. No. 1.

NATASQUA

BY

MRS. REBECCA HARDING DAVIS

AUTHOR OF "WAITING FOR THE VERDICT," ETC.

CASSELL & COMPANY, LIMITED

739 & 741 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

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Author of "WAITING FOR THE VERDICT," KITTY'S CHOICE,"
"DALLAS GALBRAITH," JOHN ANDREWS," ETC., ETC.

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NATASQUA.

CHAPTER I.

"THAT was twenty-five years ago, Dick. But there was a secret in that story of your birth that I ken't puzzle out yet."

Richard gave the boat an impatient jibe. "Let's call it a disgrace, and be done with it," he said, in his abrupt, dogmatic tone. "A man's a fool that has any mysteries in his life nowadays. Like a cheap play!"

Old Inskip pulled up the center-board uncertainly, and let it down again. His fingers, with the rest of his spare old body, had hesitated and deliberated all through his tardy life. "Luff, Dick! I think I'd like to say a word or two to you before we land."

Richard nodded, and steered the boat out

into the channel. He went on for a while, calculating silently how many oysters would be needed for planting next week, and then, glancing at the old man's anxious face, his eyes began to twinkle. Usually he left his old comrade the two or three hours he required for the incubation of an idea; but this subject had galled the good-natured young fellow a little, and had better, he thought, be put out of the way at once.

"There's no use of trying to put the word or two so that it won't hurt me, sir. That old story don't matter to me a whit; not the weight of a straw. When I was a romantic cub of fifteen I used rather to hug myself on the idea of being a foundling. But I've no time for such follies now. I've never felt the need of a father or mother."

Inskip rubbed his hairy legs with the palms of his hands. "Haven't you, Dick?" he hesitated, looking at the other shore.

"God knows I haven't, sir!" heartily. Dick clapped his big hand on the other man's shoulder, shaking every bone in his body. "There's not a young fellow on the coast whose father and mother have done for him what you have done for me. You know that. Now let's be done with that old matter. As for a father and mother that I never saw, they are not of so much importance to me as—as this boat here. How could they be?"

Inskip looked at him doubtfully as Dick began to whistle, interrupting himself presently with—"What did De Conce offer for the oysters?"

"Two, or two-twenty."

The boat pushed along, muddying and cutting the fungus-like growth of seaweeds beneath. Boat or horse must go like steam express under Richard's guidance. He would have gone post-haste over the Styx, good-

naturedly inventing a better tiller for Charon as he went, and giving him gratuitous hints in navigation. Inskip, according to his custom, sat watching him, looking, in his bare legs and arms, and leathery shirt and trowsers, like a bony continuation of the wooden bow. Nothing could be so manly in his eyes as the boy's broad, bluff figure and decisive face, yet a vague doubt hung hazy in his brain of shallowness. Shallowness. Were oyster-beds, and New York trade, and the boat, the real things after all? To the old fisherman, who had never had wife or child, the dim ghosts of this father and mother; the mysterious untold story of birth and death; the inexplicable sweet danger of love some day coming to Dick, were the actual matters of life. Though, if you were to talk to Inskip for years, he would serve you with no better matter than plans for fishing, or thin, pointless stories borrowed entire from his

grandfather, the sole contribution the Inskip family were likely to make to the world of thought.

There was a necessity for him to speak to the point now, however, and at once, as they were pushing rapidly in-shore.

"I must go back to that old story once more, Richard."

"Very well, sir. Will you haul in that sheet?"

"The woman who brought you here said your mother and father were dead. She did not tell even me more than that, though she knew I would take you when she died. Three years ago I had a letter, sending money. It was from your mother."

"What did you do with it?" sharply.

"I sent it back, Richard."

"Right." Dick began to whistle again, to keep his tongue still. He would not reproach Inskip. But, with his propensity

for managing other people's affairs, it was hard on him that his own should have been taken out of his hands. He would have liked to deal with this woman who had entailed her guilt on him at birth, deserted him till now, and was coming thus late to shame him.

"There is something else, Richard. I had a letter from her the other day. It was not dated nor signed. It only said that your mother would be here this summer, and begged that you would not leave the beach."

Dick for a while silently pulled and wound his ropes. "If she comes, leave me to meet her," he said at last, quietly. He did not ask to see the letter, but jumped on shore. "I'll go and settle that job with De Conce," nodding good-by, pleasantly, as he walked off. This business of his mother he had also settled and set aside. Inskip looked after him with a queer, quizzical smile. Were love and

passion, remorse, death itself, jobs which Dick could attack with his shrewd eyes, and hat cocked on one side—sort, label, and clap on the shelf as finished? The old man could not put his thoughts into words, even to himself, but he remembered vaguely a carpenter he had seen once finishing off a lot of coffins, dismissing each with a nod of satisfaction. He loosened the sail and drifted out into the current, while Dick's stout, swinging figure, in its sack and trowsers of brown tweed, and jaunty cap atop, went steadily across the marsh, in sharp relief against the far horizon. It seemed to have absorbed into itself all the energy of the hot, sleeping landscape.

The Natasqua hardly deserves to be called a river. It is one of those openings into our rocky coast through which the sea stretches its groping fingers on the hills, and lays upon them the spell of its own loneliness and quiet.

Inskip floated along the banks of red clay which edged the water; the wind hardly stirred the bit of blue tape hanging down from his hat; the fields of feathery wild carrot belting the shore glared white in the afternoon sun; the brownish ledges of hills rose, tier beyond tier, shutting him in from a world of which he never had known any thing, and the water, tea-colored on the surface, and cold and brackish on the hottest day, sank in somber, impenetrable depths beneath him. It was one of those out-of-the-way corners of the world where nature seems to carry on her secret, silent processes of healing and of birth; where we dimly know that, if our souls were cleaner and eyes clearer, we might come some day suddenly upon the great mother, unawares, at her eternal renewing work.

"It's curious," thought Inskip, "that the boy kin think of tradin' in oysters here."

Dick, being an educated man, could have put the peculiar meaning of the place into better words—if he had ever seen it. But he never had. Inskip paddled along, thinking, if Dick's mother could meet him here, all would go well between them: her sin would somehow fall off from her; the boy's heart would go out to her full of love and forgiveness. The place was awful in its inexpressible beauty and quiet; he felt vaguely that human souls in it lay bare and naked before God. The old fellow, who was chosen by the men thereabouts to settle their disputes, because of his dry, shrewd sense, was full of a lax, pitiful tenderness for all women-folks, for which the sharp-nosed, contented fishermen's wives seldom made call upon him. He had fallen into the habit, therefore, for years, of prosing to himself about this unknown mother of Dick's, and lavishing it upon her, set apart, as she was,

from others, by a great crime and a great punishment.

Dick, jumping over the fences of the marsh, looked at the affair in a different light. It was not an uncommon thing, he knew, out in the world, for a certain class of children to be put out of the way ; he might be thankful that he had not been disposed of in a more summary fashion. And Master Dick was quite aware of the loss to the world if he had been choked off prematurely in his cradle. He had not done badly with his life so far, beginning as the charity child of a poor crab-fisher ; what with a turn as peddler, photographer, school and books at every moment that could be spared from work—and now his oyster and clam farms, in which he had at last become master and director.

"The land belongs to the man with money," he had told Inskip, "but the water to the man with wit to use it."

Dick's course brought him to the river again, which made a sudden turn, as sharp as a V. The sun was down by this time. The cedars, gray with their gummy berries, began to gloom in the cool shadows. There was a bar of rippling, golden light across the water. On the yellow sands a woman was picking up kelp. Dick went up to her.

"It dries into different shades of brown, they tell me," said she, by way of good-evening.

"Very likely. I don't know. It makes poor manure. Though I have an idea," kicking it critically, "if the essence was extracted, as they do with moss-bunkers—" Dick stopped with an awkward laugh. For the first time in his life, perhaps, it occurred to him that the wisdom and information with which he was brimful was overflowing inopportunely, though the girl's soft eyes were fixed on him attentively.

"What does she know of moss-bunkers or manure either?" sitting down to watch her. The dark water behind her slowly kindled into a sheet of pale color—subdued pink and violet; a blue heron swooped down black and sharp over the glassy surface, and was gone; the locusts droned on in an unknown tongue their song of sleep and summer. Her walk up and down the beach was leisurely and drowsy; the soft brown bathing-dress clung to her rounded limbs; there was an edge of scarlet about her full white throat and uncoiled hair; now and then she held up a weed or shell, asking him to praise it with her smiling, appealing eyes. The woman and all that she owned were made to be praised and petted, Dick thought, with a novel compassionate swelling at his heart, which he had never given before to any helpless baby. The opaline water, the heaps of ash-colored kelp, the unseen wail-

ing sea, were only manure and fishing-ground to Dick; but the sense of beauty, the new feeling of rest akin to pain which came to old Inskip through them, had reached this full-blooded, dogmatic young fellow through the girl, for the first time in his life. Dick's life threatened to be a stifling chamber of trade and barter; but there would be one crack at least through which the light could creep that lay in broad, unpriced sunshine about some other men.

Dick was ready enough in dealing with men; he had a simple, downright habit of knowing his rights, and taking them, which blunted the sharpest New York traders; but of women and society he knew no more than he did of babies; looked, indeed, upon them as denizens of an overgrown nursery. He did not notice that the dress which clung to this woman was of delicate make and stuff, as high-bred and æsthetic in its

way as a fine picture. He knew that she was one of the city people who came down for a whim to tent on the beach. Two or three days before he had found her too far out in Inskip's boat, trying to crab, and had waded out and pulled her to shore, explaining her mistake as they went. "I am Richard Dort," he said, as he climbed up, dripping, on the bank to help her out.

She looked at him. She had been going to thank him, but she only said instead, "I am Romaine Vaux," and went on to the tent. Miss Vaux's eyes looked at everybody with the same babyish, soft appeal; but the peculiarity about them was that you could not shake them off when she was gone. They stayed with Dick oddly; he fancied them steady and searching; weighing, labeling him at his value. Richard had met her once or twice since, and they had talked of the fishing and marl.

It was growing dark when she tied her kelp into a bundle; the jelly-fish, in luminous blobs, rose here and there in the sheet of dark water, kernels of soft white fire. "I must go home," she said.

It seemed quite natural to Richard to walk beside her, and he did it naturally, as few city-bred men would have the art to do. To be sure, she was not like the raw-boned women he knew, in their sleazy pink calicoes, but as for any difference of rank between her and them—it never occurred to him that there was any. He was a man, and they were women; that was all there was about it.

They came in sight of the tents. Natasqua beach was the fashion that summer in the New York set to which the Vauxes belonged. There was a gay little camp on the sands, beside a cottage in which boarders were taken.

"That is my father's—Major Vaux's—tent, beside which the fire is burning."

"I will give the colonel some hints, then, about building his fire to leeward," said Dick. Miss Vaux smiled and nodded to the strollers they met, who glanced furtively at the young crab-fisher beside her, with his bare feet and cool, good-humored swagger. Dick, meanwhile, was wondering if his mother was among any of these groups. She was most probably a servant or housekeeper, whom some of the city people had brought down. What if she were to come out and proclaim the shame of his birth before Romaine? He had not felt before how the girl had embodied to him all there was of chasteness and modesty in the world.

"I think I will go back," he said, stopping short, a fierce throb at his heart.

"I want you to go on with me," with an amused twist in her babyish mouth. She

had told her stepmother that very afternoon about Dick. She told her everything; colored, altered, lied a little sometimes, to amuse the meager, anxious little woman, who found it such hard work for her tired legs to keep step with that corps of heavy dragoons—Major Vaux and his four sons.

"The crab-fisher, after he had dragged me to land, told me his name quite as if we had been equals," she had said; "and I began to think we were."

"You ought to be careful, Romy," piped Mrs. Vaux. "Your dear father might not like such an acquaintance. He could not possibly make any use of a man like that. Could he?"

Romy made no answer. She held her stepmother's hand between her own plump pink palms, stroking it. The thin, blue-nailed fingers were loaded with showy rings. Mrs. Vaux, who would have been

draped in drab if she had her way, wore an inexplicable clothing of scarlet and green, flying fringes, tassels, and Arab mantle, wisps of false hair hanging disheveled, according to the highest art of the coiffeur, about her lean, rasped face.

"Do you like this costume, Romy?" she said, anxiously. "It was one of those your dear father designed himself, and ordered from Storm. He said the colors would suit the clear sky to-day."

"Nothing in it is so becoming as your wearing it, mother," she said gently. "How was Storm paid, by-the-by?"

"In puffs, my dear. Oh, very well paid, of course!" eagerly. "You did not think your father was still in debt to him? He wrote a copy of verses for the *Family Journal* on Storm's show-rooms, and embodied descriptions of two of my costumes in letters from Long Branch and Newport.

Oh, he was amply remunerated! You would not allow your father to design one dress for you?"

"I did not need any," dryly. "But to return to my crab-fisher," with a sudden gayety that seemed a little forced.

"Here is your father coming!" with a breathless pass of her hand over flounces and wisps of hair. "I must tell him the circumstance, Romy. It is intolerable to him if we do not place confidence in him." Romy, who dared not send a pair of stockings to the laundress without the gallant major's knowledge, nodded. A large, florid man with English side-whiskers advanced with a military step up the beach.

"Major," fluttered Mrs. Vaux, "Romy tells me—"

"My love! one moment!" with a bland wave of the hand. "If you *would* say, 'My dear major!' We are now among strangers,

in the very eye of the public, as I might say. Our private life is liable to be commented on by reporters and correspondents at any moment. Why not make its beauty apparent, then?"

"Oh yes, certainly, dear major. I was going to say—"

"Of your affection I have no doubt." The major's trombone voice was in full wind now, and rolled in triumph up and down. "Why should it not, then, be manifest to others? 'Love is a creature of such heavenly birth'—you doubtless recall the remainder of the quotation. You were about to remark, my dear wife?"

Mrs. Vaux always spoke to her husband in a shrill, frightened falsetto, which was timed now to high-pressure speed by his rebuke. She managed to jerk out the story of Romy's adventure in half a dozen incomplete sentences. "I was afraid the young

man might presume on it to call," she ended lamely.

"I shall be heartily glad to see him. Heartily!" and from his puffy white hands and broad expanse of purple waistcoat to his bloated rolling voice, he was the very impersonation of oppressive hospitality. "Let us come in contact with the people—the very dregs of the people, if you choose, as in this case. You never have understood my principle, my love. I am glad that Romaine does, and is willing to join with her brothers and myself, at last. The more we come in contact with the people, the better for ourselves and our business. Socially, our position is impregnable. Vaux & Sons, who command the advertising patronage of one hundred daily journals, can afford to meet any social Pariah. We hold the public by the ear, as it were, like an overgrown donkey, and lead it where we

will. Our rank is higher than money, Frances. We are of the blood-royal of intellect."

"Yes, I'm sure I understand, major."

The major could not bear interruption in an oration. "I am very sure that you don't," testily. "I would embrace in charity, as it were, all human beings. There is no knowing which of them may need a newspaper. We can go out to meet this crab-fisher, for instance; not, of course, as an intelligent being, such as Judge Parker, who can push us as vehicles for Government advertising, or any of our Congressional friends. But the inferior orders of God's creatures also were made to be of use. The sheep gives us wool, the cow beef, and this young man—"

"May give an advertisement," added his daughter.

"Precisely," turning his glaring topaz ring

leisurely in the sun. "What's o'clock, Romaine?"

Now Mrs. Vaux knew by instinct that the aristocratic major already rebelled against longer companionship in his thoughts with this fishy inferior, and made divers grimaces to warn Romy of the peril she was in. But the girl stumbled on for want of something to say.

"One peculiarity about him I did not tell you, mother—his name."

"I do not perceive, my daughter," he interrupted, "how the name of persons of this class can concern us. If they advertise—well. But their names or habits are matters into which I should no more be tempted to examine than those of the slugs or these very unpleasant beetles who torment us at night."

"But the name was peculiar," persisted Romy. "I never knew any family of the

same, mother, but yours. You, at least, ought to be civil to the man."

Was it the cold sea mist, or fear of her husband, that gave the meek little woman's rouged face that sudden chilled look? Her voice, too, had lost its ordinary scared quaver, and sounded unnaturally quiet and controlled.

"What is his name?"

"Dort—your own. Richard Dort."

"It is very improbable," blustered the major, angrily. "Your stepmother's unusual name bears inherent evidence to the good blood and breeding of her family. If this fellow has it he has stolen it, that's all."

While the major fumed and clucked about, his wife got up and went up the beach. He scowled after her through his eye-glasses. In town she dared not violate his rules by going off the two squares'

aristocratic beat. But his face relaxed as he watched her fluttering figure zig-zagging over the sands. "Your mother is fond of solitary walks here in the country. They are hardly *en règle.* But the world may ascribe them to a love of nature. And if it does not—let her have her own way!" with a gulp. "Curse the world! Are we to be tied neck and heels by it?"

Late as it was when his daughter brought Dort that evening, Mrs. Vaux had not yet returned. The major marched pompously up and down, watching the manufacture of some oyster *rissoles* in the fire by the black cook. He wore an amazing seaside costume of his own devising, part sailor and part brigand, unprecedentedly embroidered and baggy. He rolled in his walk as though on quarter-deck.

The sight of him woke Dick with a shock out of a queer drowse into which he had

fallen. The twilight, the lapping water, the soft steps pit-a-pat with his own, the contact, light as a breath, with a womanly form beside him, had touched him as so many magnetic fingers, bringing him like the clairvoyant into a new world of both facts and fancies.

A wife? Of course he must marry. And this—this was the first woman he had ever known. As for the fish-girls of the coast, he saw now how strong an infusion of the man and animal there was in them. Looking at Romy, with his dominant masculine eye, he counted her as won. Dick had domestic instincts, a big affectionate nature, and usually—his own way. He was shrewd enough to see that, in the gross, his education was better than the girl's. What obstacles could there be in the way? Why not marry her as soon as he had money enough?

Clearly, Dick knew the world no better than any other young cub with its eyes not yet fully opened.

If he felt for a moment that there was nobody in the world than he, the man, and she, the woman, the portly apparition of Major Vaux promptly disabused him of the idea.

"My father, Mr. Dort—Major Vaux."

The major's prompt, effusive greeting was a novel experience to Richard. To a well-bred man it would have been overglossed and stagey; Dick, it bewildered and daunted. In a moment he found himself whisked into the tent and before a *beaufet* covered with liquors. There was a glitter of silver presentation-cups with flattering inscriptions; there was exquisitely shaped glass; there were wines, crimson, amber, purple, of whose names even Dick had never heard.

"Dry or wet, Mr. Dort? Indifferent, eh? Adolph, a hock-glass! You see us in the rough, sir, in the rough! We find it good once in the year to loose ourselves from the trammels of state and fashion and throw ourselves upon the bosom of mother nature. Hence our tent, our couch of skins, our barbaric cookery."

Dick held the gold-edged glass to his lips, his keen eyes glancing over it. If this was their barbaric life, what kind of world did these people have about them in town? It was as far removed from poor Dick as Al Raschid's palace, and the major's urbanity drove that bitter truth home on him with every bow and grimace. Shrewd Dick felt, too, that they would not have dragged an equal in to drink at the first moment of acquaintance. It was to an animal or inferiors they would offer the hospitality of victuals instead of ideas.

A gentleman from another tent, a Mr. Langton, strolled over, and Dick had leisure to compare his own treatment with that of this stranger, who belonged to their own caste and culture. The major probed Dick's specialties of knowledge, oyster-planting and the like; applied his pump, and speedily drained him dry. He got material enough in half an hour to work up into one magazine article and two leaders.

"When you are sufficiently prepared to bring your business formally into notice, I will do what I can for you, young man," he said, summing up the matter and, in effect, dismissing him. "Vaux & Sons are the great advertising agents for the east. They command three hundred daily journals. We hold the public by the ear, Mr. Langton," with a puffy laugh, "as it were an overgrown donkey, and lead it where we will."

"And you ride the beast hard, Vaux!"

"Ah! now you do me too much credit! But I tell you," putting the topaz-ringed finger confidentially on the other man's breast —"I tell you—Romaine, my child, explain to Mr. Dort the machinery of Adoph's *cuisine*. You may find some useful hints there for your life in the swamps, sir. I was going to remark, Langton, as soon as we were rid of the young man, that there's no beast so profitable as the public, and no way of drawing the best juices from it like that of the newspaper. Make up your mind to put your capital in with ours, sir, and try it. What do I want?" falling into oratorical swing. "A house on the Hudson? A place in the Customs for my son? A coat? Jewelry for Madam Vaux? I apply my fingers to the beast, in the shape of a puff, and it gives me the best it has; forces it on me! Why, sir, my cellars are filled with wines such as Stewart could not buy. I have eight pict-

ures of Mrs, Vaux in my drawing-room, by the best artists. I have her as a peasant, St. Cecilia, Andromeda chained to the rock, and four other appropriate conceptions. I felt it my duty to art to preserve her face before it faded." There was an odd touch of natural feeling in his tone, just here.

"You have no portrait of your daughter?" asked Langton, who had been one of that young lady's suitors.

"Of Romaine?" indifferently. "No. She is a good girl. Sound sense, sir, sound. But as to beauty, compared to Mrs. Vaux! —However, the child is well enough." It occurred to him suddenly that now was a good opportunity to give Langton his quietus. With all his money he was no match for Miss Vaux. "Yes, Romy is well enough. With my power in the press I can open circles to her where she will make a brilliant marriage. One match commanding politi-

cal power is now in my eye. So it goes, sir. The newspaper rules in trifles or matters of life and death. One hour it overthrows a dynasty, the next I go into the best French barber's in New York, and say, 'I am Vaux of the press,' and he leaves me,"—with triumphant gesture over his dyed hair and mustache—"a work of art! And does not charge a penny!"

There was a pause in which Langton, a clever man of the world, managed to put his chagrin out of sight. "Where is Miss Vaux?"

"In her tent. She has shaken off the crab-man, I see," looking through his eye-glass at Dick, shirking off with his head down, across the sands.

"Romaine has certain democratic proclivities which make her the fittest member of the family to deal with that class. We leave them to her."

An hour or two later, Adolph's miracles of art were placed on the round table under the tent. One or two tiger-skins formed a carpet; Mrs. Vaux wore another costume yet more redolent than the last of the sea; the major and his four sons were in strict sailor rig; the major himself had fastened a white gull's wing in Romy's jetty hair. "We celebrate our repose upon the bosom of mother nature by such trifling rites as these," he told each of the three congressmen who were bidden to dinner, in turn, as they arrived. The major often made a successful point in his life-long game of euchre by picturesque dinners, aided by his inimitable wines. He described Dick, his capability and conceit, with a few keen touches.

"One is astounded at the amount of power running to waste in the lower orders of men and animals," nodding philo-

sophically. "You did not see the young man, my dear?"

Mrs. Vaux was brushing a moth away from her plate, and did not answer directly. "I met him on the sands," she said. "He did not know me."

The major's face heated angrily. "If you had been here he would not have known *you*, my dear. The children and I may amuse ourselves with such persons, but they never are allowed to annoy you by contact." The children, Romy included, belonged to the major's early days of poverty and obscurity. But the meek, scared little woman, the last of the Dorts, whom he had married late in life, was as a grand lama to him. She was the cap and crown of his social success; she embodied all his claims on gentility and fashion. Besides, he had, in the mite of a heart hidden somewhere under the purple waistcoat and yellow seals

and paunchy breast, a queer, aching fondness for the woman, as a woman. He did his best now to show her off before Mr. Coles (then the secretary of the interior), who was their guest for the first time. When, at long intervals, she chirped out some small platitude, he looked round triumphantly, inwardly delighted, as though it were an epigram of the purest water. He noted her uneven breathing, and the deep daubs of rouge on her cheek-bones, and signified anxiously, by grimaces and nods to Romy, that one of her mother's headaches was coming on. When she fell into absolute silence he quoted her, supplying her with emotions, wit, and logic *ad libitum.*

"Four fine boys, did you say, Mr. Coles?" with a sweep of his hand to the young men. "Not bad, sir; not bad! Mrs. Vaux overrates them, however. She must have them

all about her in the home-nest. She gives them little significant names when we are alone. This cub, Newcastle (dramatic critic on the *Age*), is her Bayard; John, to your right (local on the *Standard*), is her Philip Sidney; George, who does the religious reporting for several of the New York papers, she calls Melancthon; and Porter—" The major drained his glass, his invention suddenly collapsing. "Porter's sobriquet I have forgotten. He is my secretary in the advertising business. But it instances a mother's folly, Mr. Coles. We know the weaknesses of a mother's heart."

"Not a mother in reality?" said Mr. Coles, politely. "I need but look in Mrs. Vaux's youthful face to know these stalwart fellows are only yours by adoption, madam."

"Only by adoption," she said, smiling faintly.

"You have none of your own?"

Mrs. Vaux was raising a glass of wine to her mouth as he spoke. She held it there a moment untasted, and set it down again.

"No. I have no child," she said.

Mr. Coles was in the middle of one of his best anecdotes a minute later (and all the world knows what a famous story-teller he was), when the major cried out shrilly: "What is it, Frances? Romaine, your mother!"

But Romy had her arm about her mother before he spoke to her. "No, she is not dying"—to the frightened men. "Her head troubles her at times. We will take her outside."

They carried the meager figure out, and laid her on the sands. The brilliant wax-lights within the door of the tent flamed down on the frosted silver and red wine, and the gay tiger-robes. Outside a horned, spectral moon hung low over the waste of

black water and the stretch of gray beach disappearing in the night on either side. Far off in the marshes, where the night was, a man walked, watching, as he went, the red beam of light streaming out from the tent, and the ghost-like figures moving about it. His feet sank deep in the mud; an army of moths and grasshoppers rose from the sedge before him; the gnats stung him furiously. These people belonged to a world of ease and refinement and culture, of whose existence he had never even heard until to-night. The gulf between him and them was broad as that which lay between Dives and Lazarus. He saw that clearly now.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Langton kept an observant eye on Miss Vaux's comings-in and goings-out. He soon discovered that the young crab-fisher was oddly associated with them. If she was belated in her solitary explorations among the cranberry bogs, Dort was sure to discover her and bring her home; if she ventured too far out in her boat, it was Dort's seines she ran into, and he paddled her to shore out of self-defense; when she came back from the hills, it was Dort who followed behind, a beast of burden loaded with lichen or moss.

Langton, being one of those men who dribble out every fear or fancy to the first passer-by, ran with the matter to Coles. "There's an attachment there," he cried,

"take my word for it. There's an attachment. The romance of the thing—solitary—hills—sea! These chance meetings have bewildered her."

"Nonsense! Why, I know that young lady, Langton; she is a lady. There is not a drop of her blood that belongs to the Vaux breed. She is delicate and refined beyond most women. And this fellow is a vulgar crab-man, I think you told me? Red shirt—bare legs—toes for clams, eh?"

"N-no." Langton hesitated thoughtfully. "He has a certain amount of culture; a heterogeneous mass of book-learning, with utter ignorance of society. I can understand the attraction the fellow has for her. There is a genial, downright straightforwardness in his manner that had an odd charm in it even to me, and Romaine Vaux has lived on sham and varnish until one would think her soul loathed it."

Coles laughed. "That's true. The major is certainly the cursedest—but sharp as a steel trap under all his weakness. He would have smelled the rat in the arras in this affair, if there were any there. He keeps a keen watch on Romaine. She is his right bower. He means to play her some day, and win."

"I know it. But that very idea blinds him. He talks of Dort as a sort of hireling whom Miss Vaux employs. 'I hope you remunerate the man for rowing you about,' he said to-day. 'Bring him up and I'll give him a bottle or so of ale, if you don't care to spare money. These water-rats 'long shore drink like fish,' he added, turning to me. No. He sees nothing."

"There's nothing to see. It's all your jealousy, Langton. Miss Vaux is a pure, sweet girl—a good deal too clear-sighted to throw herself into the gutter in that fashion."

Mr. Coles strolled away, and Langton turned toward the Vaux tent. "Sweet?" Oh! there was no doubt of her amiability, poor Langton thought bitterly. It hid her, and kept unwelcome intruders off from her as effectually as would plate armor. But what the deuce was she thinking of under the sweetness? "There she is," he muttered, "just the same, with her pleasant laugh and gentle, soft glances, whether she refuses to marry me, or sits listening to the major toadying one man and bragging to the next. By George! what gall and wormwood that must be for the girl to drink! I don't wonder she is ready to fling herself to the first honest crab-fisher that comes along, to be rid of it."

He was resolved to move in the matter at once—but how? A word to old Vaux would be effectual, but Langton was loth to put the girl in her father's power; he had

a fancy that with all the major's purring softness he had tigerish claws. "He has no affection for any thing under God's heaven but his wife," he thought. Mrs. Vaux? Hillo! There was a chance! Langton quickened his steps to the tent. The woman has common sense, he thought; he could appeal to her without risk.

Mrs. Vaux was sitting on a pile of the tiger-skins at the door of the tent when he came up; netting, as usual, with breathless eagerness at some gaudy enormity of zephyr and beads. She manufactured such quantities of these pouches and caps, that the steel needles seemed to have grown a part of her fingers. The money she made (for they were sold secretly) the major deposited in bank for her, and refused to touch, no matter how close to starvation they were pushed sometimes. "It is your mother's little secret," he would say gently to the

Vaux boys. "Let her keep it. Some deed of holy charity, doubtless."

She looked up smiling when Langton approached. When the major was out of sight, the scared little woman had a certain timid dignity of her own, very winning and pleasant.

He took a seat on the skins at her feet. "I came to speak to you in reference to Miss Vaux, madam."

Mrs. Vaux bowed and straightened her thoughts and her thread, with a sly, amused glance at the young man. If Romy's lovers came for information from her, they would find she could fence and parry, and guard the child's secrets as well as any man of them all. It was like the ghost of one of her own old love-affairs coming back. Her thin cheek grew red and her eye sparkled.

"You know this young man, Dort, doubtless, Mrs. Vaux?"

Mrs. Vaux turned sharply and looked at him.

"Dort? You came to talk to me of him?"

"And of your daughter. The subjects are the same, unfortunately. Can you give me your attention for a moment?"

"Dort, you said? I have never seen him. I have been in the tent and heard his voice. But I have never looked at him. Never."

"You feared Major Vaux would dislike it, probably?"—gently, for the inexplicable agitation of the poor lady touched him. Was Vaux such a tyrant, that the mere thought of his annoyance could so shake the woman? She had recovered herself, measurably, however, before she answered him.

"I have no fear of displeasing my husband. I have never wronged him knowingly—not in the least trifle," with a steady coun-

tenance, but for a queer quaver in her chin. "Of what did you say you came to talk to me, Mr. Langton?"

"I won't detain you long. It is a matter in which I fear you will think I have no concern." He drew closer to her, and lowered his voice.

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Langton had ended his conference. Mrs. Vaux sat for awhile on the tiger-skins, fingering the heaps of purple worsted and steel beads in her lap. The gaudy things had filled a miserable, pathetic part in her life. She was thinking about them rather than the story he told her. Since she was a pink-faced, coquettish little chit, it had been Fanny Dort's habit to seize on the trifles of life, and keep as far as she could out of the great currents of love or passion and right or wrong. She got up and went down the beach in search of Romaine, trying to think of the turtles and frogs down in the sedge, or the blue dragon-flies flashing in the evening light over the black gul-

lies she crossed. But, in spite of herself, she went back to that day—that one day which had put meaning and strength into her shallow life when she was a girl ; when from noon till dark her baby, her own baby, lay on her bosom. A single short half-day ! They took him away the next. But she fancied the fat little hand was fumbling now about her neck, and could feel the milk throb again in her withered breasts, on which a child had never lain since then. She went over it all. How, when they told her the boy was dead, as well as its father, she had gone, flirting and giddy, into the world she lived in now—fastened herself in. It was a world made up of the major, and cheap finery, and a footsore tagging after fashionable people, and puffery, and perpetual brag. She, too, had learned to brag in her piping way ; and to gape at and imitate the habits of her betters, as the major called their

richer neighbors. When the time came that she found her child still lived, she had nothing left her to do but to sit and chafe year after year at the intangible meshes which she had woven, that kept her from him—inflexible as chains of steel—and to net and crochet hideous finery to make money to send him. In the midst of her tawdry fashion and eternal pleasure-going, the soul of the weak little body dwelt alone and kept silence, as in darkness and the shadow of death. Other women held their children close to their lives; dirty greenbacks were all that were left her with which to touch or reach hers. She stretched out her hands now over the wide beach with a cry. She had come there, not hoping she would have courage to claim him, but thinking she might look at him once, perhaps find his steps in the sand, and put her own feet in them. "I must call those great Vaux men my sons,"

she cried feebly, "give them pet names; and when my own boy stands without the tent, I dare not look at him!"

She saw Romaine coming, and tried to be cool, and reason with herself what was best to be done. If Langton's story was true, and Major Vaux should discover the hold Dort had upon his daughter, the whole truth must come out.

"He must be told that he is my son!" Mrs. Vaux stopped short. "My son!" Her shriveled heart swelled for the moment to the measure of a true woman's. Romy was very dear to her: all that was bright and real in life had belonged to the girl. "My son and Romy, man and wife!" After all, there were such things as love and sincerity and actual happiness! She had missed them, but here they were!

But the major? How would she come to him with her shame? And the Vaux boys?

And their set on Fifteenth Street? How could the major tell them that his wife was a mother instead of a maid when he married her? "They would cut him at once! And he's been so long getting into society! They might overlook it, though," pausing hopefully. "There was that story of the Kartrights was worse. But Richard is only a crab-fisher! and Mr. Langton has seen him bare-legged!" She stopped again, pulling desperately at a wisp of false hair until it came out. Romy, coming up, laughed at her mother while she kissed her, and began to set her to rights. But the little woman was worn out with the life-long battle going on within her between love and sham: or, if you choose, God and the devil.

The tears stood in her eyes. "It's that braid I got at Bury's. He charged me fifty dollars, and it's nothing but combings. But it's not the hair!" she sobbed. "It's all

alike! I and all the rest of it—false and a cheat!"

Romy put her strong arm about her mother, and walked gravely beside her until she stopped sobbing.

"Now, come on!" she said. The girl had a sudden idea. Her tanned cheek reddened and her eyes blazed. They turned their backs on the uneasy tide and entered a pine forest. Their feet sank, noiseless and deep, in the brown needles; the soft sunset light shone tranquilly through the aisles of gray trunks; a spider swung drowsily across the path, the web gleaming like a red hair; there were low bay bushes here and there, whose leaves, crushed under their feet, filled the air with a pungent, reviving scent; dusty-winged moths flew lazily through the arching, dusky-green roof overhead.

"It is as still and solemn as a church!" cried Mrs. Vaux. They came out of the forest

presently into an apple orchard, in the middle of which stood a large house built of logs, as gray and feathery with lichen as the living trees. There was no living thing in sight, but two or three cows staring gravely out of their inclosure. The sunshine here was broad and unimpeded; so full of life, that a wisp of dull smoke from the chimney turned into a brilliant crimson cloud in it, and drifted over the sky; the old trees in the orchard had that curious friendly, welcoming air which trees that generations of children have climbed always have; now and then an over-ripe apple dropped with a thud upon the grass; the house-door stood wide open, and inside a wood fire burned on a broad hearth. Romy led her mother in.

"It is an old fisherman who lives here with his son. I come to see him sometimes, when the son is away. He is a good friend of mine."

"But the door is open."

"They never shut it, I believe, day or night," laughed Romy. She pulled a chair near the fire and placed her mother in it, so that she could look out of doors and yet be warmed.

"But it's a very peculiar habit not to shut a door," dribbled Mrs. Vaux. "It must be a great relief to have the idea of burglars and pickpockets struck out of the world; I spend so much time thinking of them."

Her clothes, which were damp, were drying already; a pleasant, drowsy warmth relaxed her lean body; the fire leaped and crackled, and fell in soft gray ashes; outside the sun shone. A row of purple hollyhocks edged the fence; some chickens came pecking at the fallen red apples; a sparrow hopped among them unmolested. The room was large, the walls stained a clear gray; it was kept in that certain order dear to an old

maid or a skilled mechanic. There were crab-nets and lobster-pots and guns at one end, a dresser with dishes at the other, and a great book-case full of books. Mrs. Vaux could read their titles from where she sat. "He must be a scholarly fisherman," she said.

They sat quietly for a long time. Purposely, Romy did not break the cheerful silence. Mrs. Vaux's feeble, inconsequent brain received impressions as readily as a shallow pool of water which has no color of its own. Besides, she had been tired for many years; this was a different rest from any she had ever known.

"This is a different life from ours. One is quite shut off from the world here," she said. "I suppose now, a woman who lived here would never know in all her life if skirts were worn *bouffante* or plain, and the men would never need to advertise or take

a newspaper. Dear, dear!"—with a sigh of relief, "the furniture is dreadfully out of date, Romy, but it's very comfortable."

"It's all paid for," said Romy, dryly; and then, angry at her own acrid tone, she hurried on, talking to fill the silence. "There's a great deal of hard work done here. But they live out of the woods and rivers, you understand. That is the way the great quiet comes. It's a curious sensation to take food which costs nothing, right from nature's hand."

"It must be, indeed! no butchers' bills—small tradesmen are so exacting; and no advertising, as I said. But your old fisherman is dreadfully rough, I suppose? Very unlike your father?"

"He is very unlike my father."

A quick, decisive step was heard crunching the dry grass outside. "Here he is," said Romy. "But no!" rising hastily with

a blush of annoyance and pleasure, "it is his son. I thought he was out of the way to-day."

The man came up whistling. There was a moment's pause, in which Mrs. Vaux gave a rapid glance about the room, at the nets in the corner and the books; then a terrified gleam of comprehension came into her face. She got up, steadying herself by the mantle-shelf, as he came nearer, calling to a dog that followed him. When she first heard his voice she turned, looking wildly from side to side for some chance to escape, and then she suddenly stood still.

The boy she had lost twenty-five years ago was coming back to her. She held out her trembling hands.

"What is the matter, mother?" said Romy quietly. "It is only Richard Dort."

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. VAUX nodded. She meant to tell him now that he was her son. Whatever strength or mother's love there was in her, lifted her unreliable nature at that moment into unnatural heights of courage. But the moment was as terrible to her as though her shallow, fidgety soul had been unexpectedly called to judgment before God.

"At any rate, I want to be alone," she said irritably, pulling on and off her glove. "Go out, Romy, go out; I have something to say to—to this gentleman."

Romy went out, blushing. She thought, of course, she knew what her mother wanted to talk about. There was only one secret in the world for her at that time.

There was only one for Dick. It put

blood and life into every thing else. As he came up the path, he was thinking what a confoundedly raw, uncomfortable day it was, and how a bushel or two of mussel-shells would help that potato patch ; but when he saw the gray-cloaked figure in the porch, the air between him and it grew full of autumnal, golden lights ; he saw the green arch of trailing vines over her, crusted with purplish drops of grapes ; the roses along the path opened wide, blood-red, and pungent.

"You here ! I never found you here before. You—" He had reached her with a bound and touched her hand. He always took her hand for an instant when they first met. The touch of it, white, warm, yielding, lingered on the man's rough paw until it came again, though that were for days.

"I came to see your father. I thought you were at the village."

"No matter. You are here."

She turned to look at the sky, the grapes, the pine-knots in the floor. Dick's eyes breathlessly followed hers—trembling, fugitive, conscious. No doubt, when this man and woman were babies of five years old they behaved with more reason and dignity; but oh, how red were those roses! how the grapes glimmered and shone! how God poured life into the cold wind that afternoon!

"I forgot," she said at last, with a start, "my mother is in the house. She wishes to see you. I will walk down to the orchard until your talk with her is over."

Dick helped her over the stile and stood to watch her furtively as she walked away. "If she cared for me she would give one look back," he thought. He had fallen into this habit of spying upon the girl when unsuspected. He watched at the door of her heart perpetually, with a fierce hunger like

a beast of prey, to seize on the secret of he love if it should creep out. He would have stolen it : there were times when he would have liked to wrench it from her by force ; he could do any thing but say to her manfully, "I love you," and so put his own fate to the final test. Dort, who was naturally manly and straightforward, was neither manly nor straightforward in his love. The life-long swagger had been completely cowed out of him the other day, by a swagger that was bigger and falser than his own. The major's glitter and brag had paralyzed him, as with the spell of the evil eye. Fashion, after all, is your malign enchanter ; nothing lames or palsies a fresh, young nature like it.

"I'm glad," thought Romy, "he is going to meet mother." He would see that they were not all of them sham and varnish : the silly, affectionate little woman would give him courage, no doubt. She might even

ome day be a mediator between Dort and ıer father. Romy was sanguine, as you see.

"I'm glad," thought Dort, knocking the mud off his shoes on the steps, "I am to meet her mother." If she were the gentle, lovable creature that Romy had described, he could insure himself a chance through her. Between his love and the savage snubbings he had lately received, Dick's heart had never found its way so near to the surface; he had never been so humbled, or so hungry for cordial sympathy or comfort. If Mrs. Vaux had owned herself his mother at that moment, it is probable he would have eagerly accepted her as the one thing which his life needed. But to-morrow was always Mrs. Vaux's accepted time of salvation.

Hearing his steps crunching the sand, she came toward the door to meet him. But

just then her eye fell on a square looking-glass on the wall, and she caught sight of her gaudy yellow and purple dress, fluffy hair, and the paste jewelry dangling from neck and ears. She drew back as if she had had a blow.

"Why, what will he think of me? I look like a soubrette at the Bowery," she said aloud. "No, I'll not claim my son until I am decently dressed." She stood in the middle of the room adjusting her collar, a cold sweat on her face, and a sudden, awful void in her heart

Dort stepped up into the doorway. He was broad and loosely built; his eyes gray, keen, and good-tempered, like his father's. A bold, downright air, too, like his father's. *His father?* Oh, God! Now, now she knew how she had loved that stupid, good-natured John Walt, who lived and died long ago in a country doctor's office. A country doc-

tor—but he seemed like a very god to her now, in the remembering.

Dort crossed the room, smiling, his hand out. "This is—I believe—"

"Your—your—" Her eye fell on the purple skirt. "I am Miss Vaux's mother."

It was not the first time that a tag of ribbon or daub of rouge had come between a soul and its salvation.

"I'm very glad to see Miss Vaux's mother under this roof," said Dick, bustling about to find her a seat. What odd, pleading eyes she had! There was certainly none of her husband's pomp or circumstance about this little lady.

"You are glad to see *me?*"

She sat down looking white and scared. Evidently, she knew less of the usages of society than Dick himself. As he was convinced of that he grew quite bold and confident thereupon.

"Yes, madam. Very glad to welcome you, Miss Vaux has told me so much of—"

"Oh! it is for Miss Vaux's sake—?"

"Why—yes," with a surprised laugh. "You see, I never had the pleasure of knowing you before."

"No, you never knew me"—with whitening lips, patting down her ruffles. Dick looked down at her, puzzled, trying to find out the key to her agitation. Her ordinary habit of society helped her quickly to outward composure.

"You have a sweet, quiet place here, Mr. Dort," she said presently.

"Yes, it's certainly quiet," looking about with a half-grimace. "It's a poor place enough, God knows! You and Miss Vaux must see that, though you're so polite as to appear to like it. There's such a lack of all that you're both used to—elegance and style. No hopes of them!"

Poor Mrs. Vaux, who was watching every turn in her son's face, laughed. "Do they count for so much to you?" with a queer pathos in her voice.

It moved Dick, who was feverish and excited at any rate, to sudden confidence. "'Pon my soul, ma'am, I believe they count for every thing!" throwing himself down beside her. "Why, they stand between me and all that is worth having in the world! Two months ago I would have been satisfied to see a clear way before me to earn a respectable living, and to have, of course, a little time to spare every day for a book or a newspaper. Now—well, now I see that there is one thing more which I must have, or I give up life at once; and I can never obtain it without rank, and position, and style. How the devil am *I* to have position and style?" with a sudden, despairing gesture, as though he tried to clutch an intan-

gible something in the air. He recovered himself presently, with an awkward laugh. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Vaux; I'm sure I don't know why I should talk to you in this way!"

"*I* know." She put out her hand timidly and touched his hair. There was a certain proud sense of possession in the touch. This was *her* son. There was, too, the mother's love that had been famishing within her all her life, and never till this moment found chance of utterance. "What is it that you want? Can I help you? If I could help you, Mr. Dort, it—it would matter more to me than you know."

Dick drew back a little, on his guard. "You're—you're very kind, I am sure. I thought, perhaps, you would prove our friend. She has told you, perhaps?" looking at her searchingly.

"Romy? No. But I knew. I guessed.

Oh, when I was a girl I knew what true love was!" fluttering her skirts with a pathetic little cackle. "I had begun to think there was no such thing left in the world, until you and Romy—"

"I do not know that Miss Vaux cares for me. I have never spoken to her as I am doing to you."

"Cares for you? Oh, there can be no doubt as to that!" drawing herself up angrily. The idea of Major Vaux's daughter rejecting her son!

"Do you think that? Thank God!" Dort took out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

"I'm quite sure of it."

"You'll think me a fool, no doubt," he said after a while, "to care for any woman so much;" thoughtfully crumpling his handkerchief into a ball. Once sure of Romy's love, the old, comfortable complacency

began to warm in his veins. "It was always my theory, Mrs. Vaux, that love and marriage were comparatively trivial matters, which a man should hold in his hands, as one might say, apart from his real business in life, to keep or throw from him"— and he threw the ball into his hat at his feet, with a certain decisive, victorious air—"at pleasure. At pleasure. But since I met Miss Vaux, I really am so metamorphosed that I hardly know myself." He looked at her, and laughed like a boy. It was a very frank, bright face. "My theory seems to have failed me."

"I understand." For it seemed to her that she was Fanny Dort again, in white muslin and pink sash, and John beside her. Here were his eyes and smile—this was the very same rough, cordial voice. She had been a woman with that old lover; she had known love like other women; for the rest

of her life she had been a doll, a milliner's block.

"I understand it very well," said the poor lady, with the tears coming to her eyes.

"I have nothing, you see, to offer Miss Vaux," continued Dort, gravely, "but a home like this. I'll tell the truth about it from the first. I don't want to deceive you. You see what I am. You see the house. This is the best I may have for years. I'll do what I can to push my business. But I know nothing and can do nothing outside of Natasqua. I can never give her the fashion and luxury which she has now. What do you say?"

He watched her anxiously. She looked at the room, with its white board floor, the fire burning up from the gray ashes; then out at the apple orchard, with the friendly trees on the hill-slope, so still that you could hear the crickets hopping through the seed-

grass; and down to the broad river, tranquilly flowing below, while the evening sky stained it a dull red. They thought their own thoughts out quietly—trees, and skies, and river.

A sudden conviction came to her that this was home. Here love, and truth, and God waited. In the house at Fifteenth Street there were, she thought, neither love nor God. Why should the girl not come here? Why? When she knew this boy's father she, too, had had a chance of truth and rest, and had put it away. "It would have been salvation for me," she thought; "yes, salvation."

"What is it?" said Dort, uneasily, seeing her wipe away the tears. Mrs. Vaux's tears always were ready to flow. "Did I vex you in any way?"

"Oh, dear, no! I was only thinking. Just a little matter that happened to me

long ago, in which you were not concerned, except—that is—well, relatively."

"You would be willing, then, for your daughter to come to me here?"

"Yes." She gave a queer laugh, and then was silent. He might as well, she thought, have asked her if she would be willing for Romy to go in and sit down with the blest in heaven. Was not he here? her son? Romy could sit down with him here forever, in love and quiet, secure. *She* must go back outside into the sham and eternal pushing and lying. But all she said was: "It will be very pleasant for Romy. Perhaps you will let me come for a little while now and then?"

"You think there will be no difficulty, then, about Major Vaux's consent?" Dick was intent on driving home his wedge.

"Major Vaux?" With the word a change came over her from head to foot. She

woke, as it were, completely. "The major! But you know it would be impossible for you to marry Major Vaux's daughter. Really to marry, you know. I know"—breathlessly—"it's like a church here, and makes one feel religious, and all that; and you would have true love—and *I* know what that is," stopping to sob. "But then, actually—you see, actually—looking at it rationally—. There are no carpets, and not even shades to the windows; and—well, this is really a kitchen, to speak plainly, and if you even had the money to build an addition, you could only have one parlor; and what could Romy, raised as she has been, do with one parlor? Why, Mr. Langton has a house in town, and a place on Staten Island. Oh, very stylish! And yet the major—oh, if you talk of marrying, it's impossible—impossible!"

Dort's face darkened sullenly. "I have

a mind, however, to go to him to-night, and tell him plainly what I want, and who I am."

"Who you are? Yes; if you were to marry Romy, it must be told who you are." She added, slowly, in a low voice, "I had forgotten that."

"He can learn it from any man in the county," blurted out Dick, boldly. "There is but one thing that can be said against me. I am a man whose only disgrace was his mother. Am I responsible for her shame?"

"No, no," moaned the poor little woman. But Dort did not hear her. His heat and chagrin made him deaf; he walked to the door, and stood there sulkily, giving a kick to the dog who came to rub against his leg.

Mrs. Vaux sat pressing her thin palms together. "*Shame?* but he's my son; my son," she repeated again and again. "If I can give Romy to him he'd forgive me. He'd never say *that* to me again—never."

She tried to speak once or twice, but still sat dumb. "Her shame!"

Like most weak, shallow women, Fanny Vaux had always been gently handled; even the major's gross touch had grown tender for her. Now—it was her son who had flung the vile insult in her face. No wonder that she gasped, unable to find words to answer him. She half rose.

"I'll tell him the truth. I'll throw myself at his feet and let him kill me, if he wants to!" But her courage gave way in two steps. "If I could secure Romy for him, he would forgive me any thing."

As girl or woman, Fanny Vaux was noted for her petty, amiable cunning. Her plan came to her like an inspiration. She went up and touched him on the elbow: "Listen to me. I'll do all I can to secure Romy for you. But it is useless to try to conquer her father. If we leave the beach and go back

to town she is as completely out of your reach as if she were—well, inside the wall of China, and you know what that is. Your love seems reasonable enough here. But there—!" she had a sudden vision of Dort, in his brown velveteen Sunday suit, and jaunty cap stuck on one side, presenting himself at her Thursday receptions. "If she goes back, she is lost to you."

"I do not intend to lose her," steadily. "I mean to marry her. I will tell her father so. I'll wait for her as long as Jacob waited for Rachel. Position and style? They're not impossible things."

"Oh, but they are—they are, I assure you!" hastily. "I know the world; trust to me. We go back in three days, and Romaine Vaux is then utterly out of your power."

"What do you want me to do, then?"

"Marry her to-morrow. Let the marriage

remain a secret until you are ready to claim her. Major Vaux has no power over man and wife."

Dick stood stunned a moment, and then laughed. "You are a bold ally, Mrs. Vaux. But your plan seems a trifle cowardly to me. I hate underhanded work, especially in any thing so—so sacred as marriage. I will, at least, go to him first, and if he refuses—why then—"

"Go to Romy now. She is down by the river. She knows her father. She will show you how practicable your scheme is."

"It may not be practicable, but it is honest."

"Go to Romy," shaking her head with mild mulishness.

There was a heavy, leisurely step on the porch, and old Inskip came in. Natasqua people are never surprised. He took off his old cap and held it in both hands, smiling as

though this astounding, beruffled, fidgety apparition was a daily visitor.

"This is Miss Vaux's mother, father."

Inskip held out his hand. "That young lady and I count on each other as friends," he said. "She comes here often."

He sat down and began to pull the leather-colored breeches down over his knees; but they, having no sense of gentility, resented this departure from their normal condition, and hung in rolls, like weather-beaten sails bulged by the wind.

"The skin of his legs is burned quite a mud-color," reflected Mrs. Vaux, gravely. She immediately felt the duty of thoughtfully deciding upon the character of the man who had trained her boy. "My fingers smell of clams since he shook hands, and as for his nails, I really don't think he trims them once a month."

But there was something in his face

which made her stop short. She did not attempt to sound or define it. The tears came to her eyes. "Very likely he was a better father to my son than his own would have been."

She stole a furtive, keen glance toward him now and again. But she was met each time by a glance which, though grave and kind, was shrewder than her own. She got up and walked uneasily across the room. "What does he know?" she thought. "What can he know?"

CHAPTER V.

Dort had a habit of striking the nail on the head without the least concern as to where the point went. "Father," he said, bluntly, "you remember the conversation we had yesterday, when I told you of my wishes in regard to Miss Vaux?"

The old man started, looked at Mrs. Vaux, and then at the fire, like an embarrassed boy.

"I remember, Richard," he said, deliberately, at last. But he was ill at ease. He had never had a love affair of his own, and for weeks he had been turning over this trouble of Dick's in his mind with a tender, delicious fear and delight. And now the boy was hauling it out in the market-place, so to speak, to air and examine it.

"Oh, yes!" clearing his throat, "I remember."

"Mrs. Vaux has suggested a course for me. She will talk it over with you until I come back. I have not made up my mind yet about it."

"I wonder if Dick really thinks it is oysters he is going to buy?" thought Inskip, with a quick look of alarm at Mrs. Vaux. But she saw no cause for offense. Her eyes were fixed on Dick, who threw on his cap, took a stealthy glance at the handsome, confident face under it in the mirror, and went out.

The old man followed him, trotting by his side until they were out of hearing. He stopped under an apple-tree. "Richard!" catching him by the sleeve, and pausing as if for breath.

"What is it? You look horribly cut up, father. You're not worrying about this

matter of Romy's? It will all come right. You shouldn't take my troubles so hard, dear old boy!" clapping him on the shoulder.

"Did she tell you who she was?" under his breath.

"Who? Mrs. Vaux? Why, of course. That is, she only told me she was Romy's mother; but I can see for myself that she is a woman of high fashion. Good-hearted, too, and with any amount of hard common sense. There are not many women whom I can not read. My eyes are wide open."

"Oh yes, wide open!" abstractedly. "I'd have thought you could soon read this poor woman." He looked at Dick steadily a minute, as if deciding on some puzzle to himself, and then deliberately, as usual, took his hand from his sleeve. "Go on, Dick. I'll keep her till you come back."

But Inskip did not return directly to the house. He made a pretext to himself of

going into the garden for parsley and sweet basil. He had not the courage to meet the woman again.

"Why, the mother's look in her eyes would have touched a stone, and Dick never saw it," sorting his sprigs of herbs in even lengths. He thought he quite understood how it was with her. How these twenty years of remorse and guilt lay on her. How, at the sight of him, she would try to read her boy's soul, to see if he was likely to have a clearer and purer record than hers had been. And when she had found the same temptation put in his way before which she had fallen, to love outside of his station, the poor creature had devised some plan to save him from both her disappointment and her crime.

"She hadn't courage to make herself known to him, and no wonder! She's just waiting, I reckon, till he's gone, to speak to

me. I'd best hurry in." But he made haste slowly. Pain or supreme passion were strangers to Natasqua, and of all men Inskip was the most cowardly to go and meet them.

"I'll be back with the pail, Bess, presently," patting the brown cow that thrust her head out to be stroked. The chickens were flapping and cackling their way up into the dusky apple-trees to roost. The katydids began to drone on the bark. A fish-hawk came with great circular sweeps out of the red horizon to perch for the night on its dead tree in the middle of the meadow. "Now I reckon that poor creature would rather tell her story by daylight than night" —and this thought drove him in quickly. The poor creature was sitting, languidly poising one of her daintily booted feet before the fire. She was wondering, if Romy ever did come there to live, how

about her shoes? Country cobblers were no better than blacksmiths, and Romy's feet were really so perfect! But she would never come. That chance of happiness was over for her boy.

"It is I who have done it. Ten years ago, if I had claimed him, he might have been something better than a crab-fisher. I have been his curse."

Inskip saw her staring gloomily into the fire. He drew out the table, put a cloth over it, and began to make the tea. Any thing to give her time and composure. The fragrant steam came out from the pot on the hearth in a soft, white whiff. Some soft crabs began to sputter with a savory smell in a pan on the fire. Inskip brought out a great loaf of home-made bread from the cupboard. Mrs. Vaux was both hungry and tired of emotion; besides, she had been a country girl in her youth, and this supper was a different affair

and more appetizing than Adolph's efforts of high art.

"O dear, I would like to cut that bread!" jumping up. "It is so nice in you to have tea while we are here. There! See how even these slices are. Oh, I used to be a famous bread-cutter! but that is such a long time ago. Where in the world did you pick up this old blue basket-ware china? Why, it's as precious nowadays as molten gold. Off a wreck? Actually a wreck? Oh, I wish Romy would make haste! The idea of drinking tea out of a shipwrecked cup!"

The delight seemed to bewilder her; she sat down and kept silence for two minutes. Then she plunged into the very bottom of the matter which troubled her. "The way I look at it is this, Mr. Inskip" (confidentially): "Romy might not have a parlor or shoes. But really you don't know how pleasant this room is; a great deal larger than the poky

little sitting-room in Fifteenth Street, for of course we never use the reception-rooms ourselves. It's really lovely here, with the orchard and all. And if you've no carpets you've no moths; as the major says, there are always compensations; and if Romy had a stout person to come in and do the rough work, I really don't think cutting bread and making tea and so on is so objectionable; even the cooking crabs appears to be almost a joke; and these wrecked plates and things —why, there's not a woman in our set who would not give her eyes for them! Shoes might be sent by express; and now there is the whole matter in a nutshell. Outside of these differences, why it's all the same at bottom. Romy crochets or reads in Fifteenth Street; she would read and crochet in Natasqua. I protest, when you look at it philosophically that way, the thing seems perfectly feasible to me."

"I am glad you think so." Inskip, fork in hand, looked, bewildered, alternately from her to his crabs, understanding the nature of one about as much as the other. "I was afeard there might be some difficulty in the boy's way. He spoke of Miss Vaux's father."

"Oh, the major!" with a momentary collapse all over; but she rose elastic. "That difficulty can be managed—that is, if it is managed cleverly. A little judicious maneuvering is all that is needed. I want them to leave it to me," with a sagacious nod.

"Kin I ask you how you purpose to manage it, ma'am?" he hesitated, after a long silence—"the boy's bin like a son to me, you know."

Her cheek-bones grew red. "He *is* my son—that is, he will be when he is Romy's husband, of course. It would be quite

impossible for *you*, or anybody, to understand the interest I take in Richard Dort," with a complacent, boastful little laugh, so like to Dick's own that Inskip started.

"She has his nose, too, and his kerridge precisely; head a bit on one side. But it's hard to think she's the woman I've bin lookin' for all these years," he thought, with many furtive glances at the shallow, excited face opposite. Poor Fanny appeared in her most unmotherly phase. A maneuver or a petty secret always intoxicated her like a draught of heady wine. The consciousness that she had a son living, so long as she was forced to keep it locked in her own breast, had been a dead, unaltering weight, dragging her down night and day like a hand from the grave. But this meeting him and Inskip, herself unknown; this fence and parry to escape detection; this plotting and counterplotting on Romy's behalf—why, it was a

play! She was the heroine of a melodrama! They were all puppets, and she pulled the string.

"You may be sure, Mr. Inskip," she chattered on excitedly, "I'll do the best that can be done for the young people. I think I can say, without flattering myself, I have always had some skill in managing love affairs. They need the sensibility of youth, with the judgment of an older head. Now in this case I propose a secret marriage, to be kept secret until Richard is able to support his wife. That settles all difficulties. Richard is satisfied; the major can't be dissatisfied (as he'll know nothing about it); and I—it would be better for me, too," her voice growing suddenly feeble. "For if Richard goes to Major Vaux for his daughter, I must go with him, and claim him as my son," she repeated to herself again and again. That was the ground on which she

built her whole comprehension of the matter.

Inskip stuck the fork into the table, and stood with his hands folded behind him, looking into the fire.

"You don't seem to approve of my plan?" testily.

"No," turning his grave, stern eyes on hers. "I kin see no use in Richard's acting a lie for years."

"It is to gain a wife he loves. It seems to me it must be salvation to a man to marry for love. Or for a woman. This is the only chance for him."

"I kin see no use in a man acting a lie for years. Least of all, on account of his salvation," repeated the old man, doggedly.

Mrs. Vaux gave an impatient little flirt in her chair. "Obstinate old mule!" she said inwardly. "Perhaps, my dear sir," aloud and energetically, "you think there would

be danger of detection. But that's because you don't know the world. Success in such a thing all depends on knowing the world. A little skill and management. Why, I knew of such a secret being kept—a child was born and its existence was unknown for twenty years; just think—twenty years! No shadow of suspicion fell on the mother in all that time. Oh, I assure you, Mr. Inskip, nothing's easier if you only know the way to do it!"

"Is it a good way? Kin *you* recommend it to my boy?" He turned his head away, afraid to see her face if he hurt her, but went on steadily: "'Ud that mother now, d' ye think, recommend to her boy to follow her in her shame? Has it been so good for her?"

Mrs. Vaux rose passionately, but before she found words the passion was gone. The life-long, dead pain tugged at her with its old

intolerable weight. She got up trembling and crying aloud, and went out, but without a word to him, into the garden and down to follow her son.

CHAPTER VI.

Miss Vaux was sitting in the long grass under a big paper mulberry, on the river's edge. The shadow was as dark as a tent over her and Dort, who stood beside her, and far above was the tenting sky, its still and vast folds shutting them in. A chance beam of light fell on her head, with its cap and tuft of scarlet feather. The river was a silent pathway of steel gray through the dusk; on its further shore a boat, with spectral sail, tacked and jibbed silently as a ghost. The dark figure of a crab-fisher, of which only the head and arms could be seen above the water, passed noiselessly along the shore, an unwieldy boat coming after, tied to his waist. He passed out of sight. The silence was absolute. There are no singing

birds in these woods : no birds at all except dark, tiny sparrows, who hop along the sand without a twitter.

"It might be the shore of the Styx," said Miss Vaux, speaking with an effort. "And yonder is Charon's boat, waiting for a passenger."

Dort made no reply.

"Look at the coloring on the bark of this tree, Mr. Dort. Red, purple, saffron, every shade of the browns. One would think nature had used it for her palette, or tried her brushes on it."

"Confound nature and her palette!" said Mr. Dort inwardly. But his lips were inexorably shut.

"They ought soon to cut the sedge," she ventured, thirdly. "This is quite dry."

"What do I care for Charon, or the sedge? Why do you talk in this way to me?"

"Because there is nothing else left for us

to talk of," she answered steadily. "Because, one day more and we will be strangers to each other for the remainder of our lives. It is safer that we should meet as strangers now."

"Romy!"

She rose as though against her will and stood beside him. He held out his hands to her.

"Yes, I know," she said, answering words which he did not speak, "I know what I am to you."

"But you—you! I am a clam-digger to you, that's all! A vulgar fellow that could amuse you for the time; something curious, a little out of the common town-way, to be ranked with the sea-horse that you dried, or the plaice, with both eyes on one side—eh?"

"You are unjust;" quietly. "I have told you that I love you."

"But what kind of love is it?" When she

did not answer, he stood hot and fuming beside her, without speaking. In his secret soul he was ashamed of his rage at being thwarted. It seemed to him, as the dark tree shut them in, there was but this one living creature in all the world. It seemed as if, by a swift, hard insight, he saw for the first time clearly himself and his past life, his incompleteness, his uncontrolled temper, his ignorance, his conceit. All that he lacked waited for him in her. Mentally, if he reasoned about it, of course Romy was a weak, soft creature. Yet she had a curious effect upon him; the man he might be, which he never had thought of till she came, stood before him whenever he was by her side, clear and healthy and real as to-day's noon sunshine. Soft and weak though she might be, there was an invisible wall about her, too, stronger than any strength which he knew. He was parting

from her, in all probability, forever; he was mad with passion to touch her; her babyish mouth, her thin, blue-veined hand, with the glove half off, her cloak, were but a hand's breadth from him, yet he could not put *his* finger on them. The line of invisible air might have been a gulf wide as death, so impassable was it. He spoke at last. She turned quickly.

"There is but one day more, and then you are gone. Do you know what it is that you leave me to? I wish I could tell you. I have no words like the men who are your companions."

He stopped short. How could he show her that she was the only gleam from that outer world of refinement and culture which had ever come to him? He could not tell her that when she was gone he would sink back into Dick Dort, clam and oyster trader, with neither ideas nor ambitions

beyond a lucky planting or a sharp sale. Was it best to tell any silly girl that she had such absolute power over a man's fate? He would have liked to assert the proper difference between man and woman; to be masterful, dominant; to beckon her toward him as the sultan his favorite. But he found that, in fact, he did nothing of the kind; he only raged or complained. "You think of duty. You have no thought for me," he said sullenly. In spite of his flash of humility, he felt that he was well worth thinking of. He was sure that there were very high places in the world waiting for himself, or men like him. "Give me a chance of calling you wife, Romy, and I will show you what I can make of myself."

Now Miss Vaux had neither her father's love of talking, nor his facility of expression. Whenever she was driven to the wall and forced to speak, otherwise than by looks or

smiles, her words were few, and not particularly well chosen.

"I never thought of what you would be. It's only what you are. You are so—so honest; and I have not always lived among honest people." Her dark blue eyes met his, but not steadily as usual. They were full of tears; she held out her hand, hoping he would take it. Romy had neither love nor petting at home; had never had them; she only, therefore, like most still, cold-mannered women, wanted them a little more than the rest of her sex.

But Dick drew back, biting his lips. "Don't touch me, unless you will come to me altogether."

"It is you who forbid me to come. I do love you. Why won't you believe that I love you, Richard?"

"How should I believe you? There is but one chance that you should become my wife, and that you refuse."

"It is not the only one."

"What can I do but adopt your mother's suggestion? I confess it did seem cowardly to me at first. But I see no other course."

"It is not cowardly only, it is base; it—is—no matter: it is one which I will never accept. I will be no man's wife clandestinely."

"When I came to you to-night I thought your father might consent. But you—"

"I don't underrate the difficulty, as you did. He will not consent to-morrow, nor the next day, perhaps never."

"What would you have me do, then?"

"Go to him fairly. He is human, after all," she said laughing. "He knows what love is. There never was loyaler lover than he to his wife. Let us wait. Love and patience and common sense can conquer any thing in time."

"I do not see how you can talk cheer-

fully and be ready to joke about it," he said, clapping his hat on irritably.

"Life does not seem so tragic a matter to me, after all, Richard. There's no need of putting our love into the Ercles' vein. There is no danger of our growing old or gray-headed. What if we should wait a year or two?"

"I don't know what you mean by the Ercles' vein. I do know that you throw me off as you would a cast-off shoe, without a thought. I ask for no more than a legal hold on you, that I may claim you when the time comes."

Miss Vaux's blue eyes watched him with a quizzical laugh. "It is my father, I think, that you propose I should fling away like a worn-out shoe that had served his turn. Doesn't it occur to you that the nineteen years of love and service he has given me deserve that I should not turn my back on

him for a friend of three weeks' acquaintance, without at least something of a decent apology? I am unromantic and prosaic, perhaps. I know you have all the poets and novelists on your side. But, Richard," and then her voice broke, and she held out her hand again, "my love for you is the honestest and purest thing that ever came to me. Don't ask me to make it a sham and a lie. I can't eat my father's bread for years under a false name, plotting against him and tricking him, day and night. If that is all that is left to us, I'll go back to him; you can stay here."

With that the young lady turned and walked up the hill. If she had carried her head stiffly or set her feet down sharply like any other angry woman, Dick would have followed her and renewed the struggle. But she went on her way with as easy, soft tread as the day he met her first, the same genial,

quizzical laugh on her pretty face. There was no means of knowing how much flint lay under that soft-tinted flesh and good humor. He let her go, and sat down doggedly on the ground, clasping his hands about his knees.

"It's all very well to jog cheerfully along through life in that way, or to preach that it will all come right if we do our duty in a humdrum, honest way" (which poor Romy had never preached, by the way). "But there is pain and passion in the world, of which you know nothing, Romaine Vaux!" looking bitterly after her retreating figure, retreating more slowly when she found he did not follow her.

On the top of the hill she found her mother engaged in active conflict with a blackberry-bush that had caught her frizzy camels'-hair trimming.

"I don't believe you'll ever get me loose

in the world, Romy. And I have my stockings full of nettles besides. What's the matter, child? You've been crying. You did not consent to my plan? Oh, very well! You mean to break our hearts altogether?"

"It will not be so fatal a matter as that, mother," looking up from her knees and the brambles; "give father time to see that we are in earnest, and he will consent."

"Never, Romaine Vaux! Never! You do not remember that Richard is a poor fisherman; it's very romantic, I know, but really that room is only a kitchen; one can not disguise the fact."

"I remember when my father was a poor shoemaker, and I've seen our old room in Shanly Court," said Romy, quietly.

"Oh, very well! But don't talk of those old times; it's very unpleasant, and in bad taste—very bad! Your father is a gentleman now, and in affluence. He hasn't a settled

income, to be sure, but the public—don't look in that way, Romy. Don't say you're tired of living off the public."

"I did not say so, mother," gently adjusting the cloak.

"It would be very improper if you had. It is not delicate in young girls to set themselves up as censors of their parents. Your father puts the case very aptly about the public and a donkey; I forget the simile, but it's very complete. But to go back. He never would allow you to leave the world of refinement and culture in which you live, to come here."

"There may be such a world," said Romy, her soft cheek reddening, "but it's certain that we don't live in it. I'm tired of our miserable aping, and our paste jewelry, and gold that is washed brass. Oh, I am so tired!"

Mrs. Vaux looked at her in dismay. "I

never wore washed brass in my life," she ejaculated solemnly to herself. "French gilt I may have—. Well, if you are tired of it," raising her voice, "why don't you escape from it? Why not marry my—this poor boy? He loves you, Romy, as nobody ever will again."

"Because I will not make life itself as much of a sham as the rest. Oh, mother, can't you see? Can nobody understand?"

"There, there, there!" stroking her head. "I understand all about it, but as for waiting for your father's consent—do you know him, Romaine Vaux? that's all I ask—do you know him?"

Romy wiped her red eyes. "I know him as you do not, mother. I remember when I was a child in that room in Shanly Court, puny, cross, and sick. Father was police reporter for the *Times*. I remember when he would come in at one o'clock in the

morning, worn out with the day's work, and sit in his shirt-sleeves, time and again, rocking and singing to me till daylight. I do not forget that. I can't cheat him now."

"Oh, very well! The matter is decided. Go and bid good-by to your crony, Mr. Inskip. I certainly have no desire to meet him again; I consider him intolerably rude! I will wait for you here." She sat down on the dry sedge. The moon had risen; its even, cold light grew cheerful and tender, falling on the homely farm-house, the orchard, the bright river with its incessant, drowsy whisper to the shore. She drew a long breath of relief. "It certainly is better than the gaslight on the bricks, and the policeman eternally tramp, tramping up and down." It was a happy nest for her boy and Romy; but there he sat, sullen and despairing, on the river's brink. And there was Romy, going from him every moment.

The two black figures drew further apart, not to meet again. "And it is I that have done it!"

For a moment the ordinary bewilderment of scraps and tag-rag of thoughts cleared away from her brain, and she saw the truth face to face. If major Vaux knew that Dort was her son, she secretly believed he would allow Romy to marry him. "The boy has pluck and business energy. He is a Dort, and the Major counts blood for so much!" she said to herself. The story would not be so terrible to tell, after all. She was but a school-girl of sixteen when she ran away with John Walt. They were legally married; she had the certificate still. It was her mother's plan to keep the silly marriage concealed until they were of age, but when Walt died, and her baby also, as they told her, it was her own, to let it remain a secret. "I had all mamma's skill

in affairs," thought Fanny, complacently. Only a few years ago she had learned that her child still lived. "Oh, if I had only told him then!" she said. "But now—" yet even now it might give her boy a wife, place, name for life; it would take away the shame of his birth. "I have done nothing for him. Nothing! Surely I can do this little thing. The major loves me. He'll forgive me. I will go to him to-night—now." She got up; there were none of the ready tears in her eyes; the real pain at her heart had dried them. She tied on her bonnet. When the icy fingers touched her chin—"I declare it's just like death," she gasped. "Oh, I daren't! I daren't!" Was there no plan, nothing to take the place of this dragging open her whole treacherous life, as at the bar of judgment?

One good, honest effort and all would be well.

"But dear, dear! a little clever bit of finesse serves one just as well, generally, as honesty," said Mrs. Vaux, even while she dragged herself slowly to the tent. "It always has me. Let me think; let me think!" Her steps grew slower and slower; whatever she did must be done at once. There was but to-morrow; after that, Dort was lost to her and Romy forever. She stopped, leaning against a tree. Suddenly the heat began to creep back to her flesh, the dingy color to her powdered cheeks; her eyes twinkled; she began to flirt her fan vigorously. "I have it! I have it!" she cried, and, turning, went hastily toward the tent; then, recollecting herself, sat down and patiently waited for Romy.

CHAPTER VII.

The next day proved cold and threatening. The nor'easter was rising steadily. The river and coast were deserted, the fishermen all having taken their schooners and surf-boats across to the bay, where an unprecedentedly large shoal of mackerel were running in. Only Dort remained. He had been coasting along shore in the *Maid* all day. The *Maid* was a light-built, one-masted boat, sitting high out of the water, with that queer, prompt, knowing look which some boats have, even to landsmen's eyes, as though by dint of long intercourse with living beings a kind of actual life had crept into them; not human precisely; more akin to the animal. To seafaring men

this life is as tangible as their own. The *Maid* was no favorite on the coast. Dort had often been warned against her. Even old Inskip had cautioned him. "She's unlucky, Dick," he used to say. "She means mischief some day. Take that band of yaller paint off her; it looks like the ring about a copperhead's neck. It may be that. Though Ben Stolls says there was a man killed at her launchin' down the bay, and the mark of the blood's on her bows. If that's the case, there's no help for her."

In spite of their ominous croaking, however, the *Maid* had gone up and down the river for years, a faithful, pretty maid enough; and to-day, with her blood-red pennants fluttering apeak, a gayly dressed maid. Too gayly for the dull, sad day, old Inskip thought, watching her, gaudy with yellow and red, darting to and fro through the wet mist; watching her dip until the

angry water rushed in a torrent over her, and then saucily right herself. She was a painted Jezebel. It was an insolent toying with death. But the old man was full of sickly fancies to-day, and morbid. Dick and his *Maid* had river and sea to themselves. Not a boat was on the water. Not a step broke the silence of the marshes along shore, up which the tide crept in black, snake-like lines. The hills stood apart and solitary, like half-effaced sketches in India ink, upon the unhealthy, yellow sky. On summer days the Natasqua carried some secret—life, or content, or cheerfulness—among them; one hardly could give it a name, but certain it is the Natasqua was alive with it, as some priestess of old with the electric current. It was in the air, in the wash of the waves, in the dart of the swordfishes up into the light, in the lady-bugs dotting the swamp-grass like drops of

blood, in the pulpy, green, luminous sand-flies creeping here and there. But the secret was lost or out of sight to-day; a breathless foreboding kept the world silent; the Natasqua was but a dull wash of muddy water which, wrapped in a fog, oozed its way out into the ocean.

Dort had gone down in the direction of the tents early in the morning, and met Miss Vaux on the sands, and after exchanging a few words with her, had returned to the *Maid* and remained in her all day, coasting up and down. Inskip, venturing down once, found the young fellow silent and flushed, as though keeping some strong excitement out of sight.

"Goin' to the bay, Richard?"

"No. Miss Vaux is going with me down to the inlet this afternoon," he said. "She has never seen the sea under a nor'easter at spring tide."

"It will be your last sail with her, my boy, eh?" said the old man, gently.

Dick gave a queer, discordant laugh, but answered nothing. When Inskip was gone, he took out a letter to read again for the twentieth time. It had been brought to him late the night before, and was from Mrs. Vaux, marked "immediate" and "private," and full of underscoring and exclamation points.

It began without any address, which Dort did not observe, however. There were other peculiarities in it, too, which he did not notice.

"I wish to help you," she said; "why, I may tell you some day. Not now. But as God sees me, there is nothing I would not do to give you fortune and happiness. You have parted with Romaine, as you think, forever. That is all boyish heat and folly; put the affair in my hands. She urges you

to speak openly to her father, which is also mere purblind folly. You children are always blunt and headlong. A disclosure to Major Vaux of your love, and of some other matters which must be ripped open at the same time, seems to me premature and unwise. My plan is this. Ask Romy to go with you to-morrow in your boat to the sea or the other shore—anywhere. It will be exceedingly silly in her to do it, as she wishes to draw away from you : but she will go. She is a woman and loves you. When you are at the other shore, out of reach of help, scuttle your boat, overturn, shipwreck her ; you are a sailor and can understand what I mean, and manage it adroitly ; let Romy believe herself in danger, and that your strong arm and strong love saved her. Weak and frightened, and out of reach of home, you can persuade her to do what you will. Take her to the nearest

clergyman, and bring her back as your wife. The deed once done, she will see the expediency of keeping it a secret. We will return to New York; you can push your fortune, sure of a legal hold upon her whenever you are ready to claim her. We will have won the game from the major. If she is obstinate, and persists in testing her father's affection for her by a confession—the worst can only come to the worst. We will stand just where we do to-day. He shall know all." There were some half-illegible and wholly incomprehensible sentences at the close, expressive of her wish to serve him, of her regard for him, "different from that of any mother." Dick passed them over with a careless glance, as a bit of silly sentiment; though the poor little woman, false and cunning in every other line of the letter, had poured her whole, aching heart into these.

Now Dick, to be just, had inherited none of his mother's trickiness. But the savage disappointment of the day before, the feverish, sleepless night, the day itself, significant of loss and disaster, drove him to an unwonted irritability and despair. To give her up was to give up life itself. There were but a few hours in which to decide his whole fortune. On one side was Romy's plan, to risk all on honesty, which to Dort, as to his mother, seemed purblind folly—truckling to the major first, and afterward long years of hopeless waiting. On the other was this trick of Mrs. Vaux. It suited Dick's mood, somehow, to capture the girl by force, as it were—ha! that had the ring of the old masculine metal line in it! To undermine this pompous old idiot! So true love and simple worth should always triumph over the world and fashion. Dick had some such vague notions as these, but the

motive that drove him most fiercely, certainly, was that he loved the girl, and caught at the readiest means to possess himself of her.

The first part of Mrs. Vaux's programme proved successful. Romy, who had spent the night in bidding lover and love good-by forever, and teaching herself that the fragment of life left to her must be passed in tearing the thought of him out of her heart, no sooner saw him coming up the beach than she promptly sat down to gather pebbles and give him time to reach her.

"Will you go down in the *Maid* this evening to see the spring tide, Romy?"

"Yes, Richard," humbly.

"It is the last day. Let us have one hour of happiness more to remember."

"Yes, Richard."

That was all. As Dort, replacing his cap, turned off to the beach, the major and Mrs.

Vaux came up. "Your boatman coming for a last job, my dear? Unprofitable jobs enough, so far. I must really think of some remuneration for the fellow. Adolph has some household utensils, probably, not worth expressing home, that we can give him."

"I will see to it," said Mrs. Vaux.

But the major was looking after Dick through his eye-glass. "The most remarkable!—that young man has a curious likeness to some one, my dear, with whom I am familiar. But I can not fix it, for my life. The carriage—the poise of the head—the very voice! It is really unaccountable how these chance likenesses annoy us when we can not fix them."

"Had you not better look after the packing of the wine?" said his wife hastily.

"Oh, true, true! By the way, where is Romy going this afternoon?"

"To see the spring tide come in, I believe."

"A capital idea! It will be a sight worth seeing, with this nor'easter gust. I can make a letter out of it for the *Journal*, no doubt. Land and sea furnish us with pot-boilers, you see, my dear. You shall go with me to the beach, Fanny. Not a word—not a word. You shall see every thing that is worth seeing in the world, my child; you should have every thing worth having in it, if Joe Vaux had the money."

He put his hand on her head, fondly. That was more than Mrs. Vaux could bear. She hurried off from him, her conscience rasping her sorely, and the tears, with which she always paid all her debts to conscience, and washed out the accounts, ready in her eyes. A sigh heaved the major's breast as he looked after her. "I wish to the Lord I had more money for the little woman. If

she and the young ones were at the top of the tree, Joe Vaux would be satisfied with his work."

A strange silence fell over sea and land as the day passed noon. The leaden, sunless plane overhead hung low and motionless; cold mists swept steadily from the sea inland; the Natasqua rose and fell in short, sullen throbs; the only sound that broke the gray cold and silence was the melancholy pipe of the fishhawk, coming home through the sky from its bootless search after prey.

When the *Maid*, still jaunty in her yellow and red, grated up on the sand, Romy was ready to spring on board, her rosy, happy face peeping out from her hooded waterproof cloak. Mrs. Vaux, in the distance, watched Dick, his broad figure made stouter by cavalry boots and a heavily-caped over-

coat, help her up, and then take his seat at the stern, and, rudder in hand, steer out into the impenetrable gray mist.

"He is weighted down with those clothes," she cried. "What can he do in a struggle in the water? And the day looks death! it smells of death." She ran down to the water's edge. What if they never came back out of that mist and silence? It was she who had driven them to it. She crept out after the retreating wave until her feet sank in the slimy froth and kelp, calling shrilly to them; but the sound struck dead against the heavy air, and nothing but the echo of her own voice came to her again.

Wrapping her shawl tighter about her, she turned and ran on in the direction in which she knew the inlet to lie. Chance might bring her to the point where they would land. She must see the end of her scheme, whether it was death or life; and,

besides, she would avoid her husband, whom she hoped to trick by it. She would go mad if she were forced to parade arm-in-arm with him to-day, and listen to his pompous, never-ending courtship.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THIS wind is as cold as if it blew out of the grave," said Dick, looking around gloomily. "Nothing but disaster could come on such a day."

"It is a little chilly, to be sure. But it's a very comfortable day." Romy gave a contented little gurgle of a laugh, and snuggled closer under her cloak. Dick had made her sit by him in the stern, and while he guided the rudder with one hand, used the other very often to adjust her hood. Romy was quite willing that he should adjust her hood. Her cheeks grew pinker, and her eyes flashed when she felt his awkward fingers outside of the rough cloth.

She had never been so babyish or happy with him. As for her last night's forebodings and struggles with duty, she did not know what had become of them. Dick would talk to her father, or wait and work for her in silence. Wait a day—a week—years. What did that matter? Some day it would come! Now wasn't she beside him? Could she not feel him touch her cloak? The touch of the rough fellow's hand meant love, pure, faithful; he glanced at her, and presto! with the glance all of her life to come was pressed to her lips in one draught, warm, bright, tender, maddening with its hopes. Dort was anxious and moody, but she saw nothing of that, except to think how fine the pale, square-jawed face was under the broad-brimmed hat; finer than Dick's usual good-natured visage, with the cap set knowingly atop.

As for Dick, he steered aimlessly up and

down. The time was creeping fast, but he was palsied with doubt. If he took her back to the tents she was lost to him; and yet Mrs. Vaux's scheme now seemed beyond measure mean and paltry. Then he looked down into her honest blue eyes, and stooped to shelter her from the wind. She bent unconsciously toward him.

"Oh, God! I can not give her up," he cried bitterly, and steered sharply out toward the inlet. There was an old clergyman living near the beach who would marry them and ask no questions. He would not need to use Mrs. Vaux's cowardly stratagem. Romy had never been so womanish, so yielding as to-day. Let him have but an hour and he could bring her to him by sheer love.

"It grows late," she said, with a startled glance at the darkening sky.

"Do you want to go home?" urging the boat toward the inlet.

She shook her head, with a shy blush and laugh.

"Do you care to think of the time when we shall always sit thus, side by side?" Dort whispered, stooping nearer to her; "when you will be my wife, Romy? Do you ever think of it?"

The pretty little face under the cloak grew redder and brighter. "Indeed, I think of it all the time, Richard," she said frankly. "It won't be so very long till then, either."

"What do you mean?" hastily.

"Oh, with your talents, you will soon be ready to make your way and come for me," with a decisive little nod. "I'm so glad," clasping her hands earnestly, "so glad that you gave up that scheme promptly, Richard, and have done with it. Whenever I think of my love for you, or my marrying you, it is as if we were both going near to God, and

I could not go to Him with a trick and a lie in my mouth. Could I?"

"Oh, certainly not! What devil is in this boat?" rising with a purple face. "I beg your pardon. But I never knew her take her own head so before. I can not steer her." He talked fast to cover his agitation. "She follows my touch generally like a tame filly. But to-day one would believe, as the fishermen say, that she had an ugly life of her own that will have its own way."

"I don't see any thing malignant in the poor *Maid*," looking indifferently up at the sail, and wishing Dick would sit down beside her again. He did sit down presently, but remained gloomily silent. His hand tightened on the rudder like iron, steering straight for the inlet. He would not take her back until she was his wife, by fair means or foul, let her say what she would. All the strength and passion of Dort's nature were roused for

the first time in his life. She was a weak woman, and in his hold. *She would not slip out of it.* As for this goodyish honesty she talked about, it was well enough for women. He did not concern himself much with God or the devil just now ; it was her he wanted. He looked at her, trying to master the magic word that should bring her to him, regardless of the vindictive lurches and jibes of the boat under his hand. They frightened Romy at last.

"Hadn't we better go back to shore? You have no control of the boat, Richard."

"There's something about her I don't understand," with an impatient jerk of the rudder. "I thought I knew her thoroughly. No, we will not go back. I am going to take you to the inlet." They had drifted within a few feet of the shore, but Dort forced the boat out into the broad sheet of gray water between them and the sea.

"Oh, very well!" laughed Romy, wiping off the salt mist that wet her face. "You won't take me anywhere that is not safe for me, I'm sure." It was a summer day to her, and she was sailing on to the enchanted isles.

Dort was silent. The *Maid* pushed her way headlong through the water as though she relished the evil errand. In an hour the marshy shore was out of sight, and the sea-beach stretched before them, wan and threatening in the mist.

"How lonely it is! We have not met a boat on the river," she said.

Dick fastened the rudder, and sat down beside her. "There is not a living being within miles of us. Are you afraid?"

She looked quickly at the colorless sky, the dim shore, the vast moaning sea stretching to the horizon. "I am not afraid with you," she said, a little pale, but smiling.

He stooped down suddenly, drew the hood from her head, and taking it between his hands turned her face toward his own, looking into her eyes. "Are you glad to leave the world behind us? To be alone with me? Do you love me?"

Red heats dyed her face; he gave her no space for answer, but drew her close, stroked her eyes with his fingers softly, and then for the first time in her life pressed his lips to hers. Then he held her still and firmly in his arms. "You shall never go back from me to the world," he said quietly. "I intend to land on yonder beach, and in an hour you will be my wife."

On the instant she was free from him, and standing erect and apart. "Do you mean what you say, Richard?"

"Yes. I will not live without you."

She shook her head. "You should not have cheated me. You will take me back

now, home." She hesitated a minute and then came directly toward him and sat down again gravely. Dort's eyes blazed on her, baffled and fierce with passion. Hers met them, blue, cool, smiling. The childish, yielding Romy of an hour ago had vanished utterly. He held out his hands, came toward her, and then turned away. He could not touch her.

"You will take me home, Richard, I am sure," she said quietly. "You will not make me think you a trickster. I know you better."

"God knows what I am!" broke out poor Dick desperately. If he had known what a terrified, chicken-heart was beating for life under Romy's cloak, he would not have been so easily worsted. Should he give her up? He stooped to unloose the rudder, when an odd gurgle under the boat struck his ear. He tore off the flat top of the forecastle, looked

into it, turned with a quick catching of his breath, measuring the distance between the boat and the shore.

"What is it? Oh, Richard! what is it?"

"I can not take you home if I would, Romy," quietly. "The *Maid* has sprung a leak. I suppose," with a laugh, "she was jealous of the woman I loved, and revenges herself in this way." A woman might daunt Dort, but danger brought him at a touch back to his cool self. He was busy on his knees while he spoke, probing the leak.

Miss Vaux, on the contrary, screamed with terror: "Take me home, Richard!" catching his arms so that he could do nothing. "Must we die? I don't want to die. Take me anywhere, anywhere!"

"I'll do what I can," pulling off his boots and coat. "Don't hold my arms, my

darling." He spoke very gently, for he felt that the chance for them was over. The boat was unmanageable ; they were drifting rapidly out to sea.

CHAPTER IX.

THE major and Mrs. Vaux were pacing about the beach, arm in arm. He had followed and found her, as she feared.

"But why should you remain in this very unpleasant atmosphere, Fanny?" The major buttoned his oil-skin coat tighter about his breast. "Romy, you tell me, designed to return early. You have therefore no uneasiness about her?"

"Oh, certainly not!" clinging to his arm, and dragging him up and down the sands, while with agonized eyes she tried to pierce the blinding mist.

The major submitted to be dragged, puffing like a porpoise. "I'm very glad I met you, very glad. But—is it the view you admire, my dear?"

"Yes, it is the view."

He took out his eye-glasses and thoughtfully poised them on his nose. "It might be objected to as wet. But I have not that keen appreciation of nature that you have. I wish I had. A bit of scenery comes in well in a letter. Newcastle has that appreciation. That is a remarkable boy. Do you know, my dear, Newcastle is a better solicitor for advertisements to-day than I am?"

"Impossible, major!"

"True, 'pon my honor. As for the women in business, they dote on him. Such a handsome dog, and so cursedly religious! Well—" shivering, "you don't want to go home?"

"Not yet. One moment. What is that black speck yonder?"

"A log coming in with the tide. Nature, eh?" looking into the vast waste of water beyond the stretch of pallid beach; a shadow of what might have been thoughtfulness in another man coming into his

boastful face. "Do you know, Fanny, there really seems to be something in this! I don't quite grasp it, but—I've always said, when I had the boys settled I'd turn my attention to—well, religion, you know—and I really think I would come to a place like this to do it. There's a meaning—a—I suppose the geologists get at it with their hammers, or you poets. You are a poet; you write verses, eh, my dear?" fondly regarding her rasped, meager visage, and complacently pulling his whiskers.

She shook her head, her eyes straining on the black log that rose and fell, rose and fell with the muddy breakers, and slowly came nearer shore.

"No? Now I would have suspected it strongly. You have that expression, rapt, spirituelle—But as for this nature. I don't know what's in it, I'm sure. How's a man to find out what's in anything that isn't

advertised? Tut! tut! it's only my joke; smells a little of the shop, eh?"

But Mrs. Vaux dragged him down to the water's edge. "The log! the log!" she cried, hoarsely.

"Log? what? Merciful God! It's a body! Fanny, it's a body!"

The next wave dashed its helpless burden so near to the shore that the major, who had rushed in headlong, dragged it out. "Romy! Romy!" he sobbed breathless, untying her from the mast to which she was fastened, tearing off the cloak and placing his ear to her breast. He heard a faint throb. "Great God, I thank Thee!" he said under his breath, holding her tight in his arms, as when she was a baby.

But Mrs. Vaux stood by, staring beyond them to the sea. "It was I that sent him," she said to herself, again and again. "It was I that sent him."

The color came to Miss Vaux's lips. "Is he dead, father?" struggling to her feet. "Is he dead?"

"Who is it? The young man Dort? Where is he, my child?"

"He swam with me to shore, and when his strength was gone, tied me to a bit of mast that floated past. He is dead now."

"God bless my soul, I hope not! I'll see what can be done. Swam with you to shore, eh? Unbuckle this strap, Fanny," tearing off his coat and purple waistcoat.

"You shall not go, father. You shall not! Not even for him," cried Romy, her arms about him. But the major was a man, and made short work with women. "Stand out of the way," as he jerked off his boots and socks. "I see him yonder, not twenty yards. I used to swim like a fish. I wouldn't see a dog die, and stand by with my hands in my pockets." Now that he was doing a man's

work, the major was altogether simple and natural. He plunged into the water, puffing, striking out with arms and legs valiantly. For the fat, short-breathed man to match himself against the sea was simply suicide. Romy, up to her neck in the water, clung to him, but he shook her off, laughing and sputtering. She crept back to shore and stood with her back to the sea. Mrs. Vaux looked after him with dull, vacuous eyes. As the water covered him she tried to speak.

"Don't let him go, Romy! I—I played this trick on him to-day."

But beyond the furthest breaker the major had gallantly made his way, and there the gray mist fell and she saw no more.

While the two women waited on the shore, a man's heavy tread sounded on the beach, and old Inskip came out of the fog to them. He stood without a word, looking out to

sea. Mrs. Vaux, in all her pain, had time to think that he was like an unfeeling log.

"There are two men yonder," he said, presently, pointing out into the mist. "One is my boy; the other—"

"It is my husband."

Inskip made ready to help them, when the next wave should bring them up. He was an old man, and feeble, but he moved in the water like a fish. He went out, carrying a rope which he had tied to a spar buried in the sand. Romy brought the mast to which she had been lashed. "Can you use it?" she said.

"It is from the *Maid*," pushing it aside with a shudder.

In a few moments he came in, dragging two bodies up on the sand. Both were as still and dead as the log by which they lay. The women worked with them as well as he; but what could they do? Inskip was strong

and skillful. Presently Dort gave signs of life. At his first breath Inskip turned his muddy face up, and, for the first time since Dick was a baby, kissed him on the lips, and then the old man was seized with a great shuddering, so that he could hardly rub the men as he ought.

Mrs. Vaux held the major's head on her lap, stroking the eyebrows and whiskers, which the salt water had washed clear of dye and left white. "He is dead, and I loved him so! I loved him so!" she cried. She had forgotten to look at her son.

They worked with him a long time. Dick, weak as he was, crept over and did what he could. He had no thought to spare, even for Romy, so intent was he in watching the major's face. "Will he live?" he said to Inskip, apart. "He was but a short time in the water."

"No, he wa'n't but a short time in the

water, but ther's a beam or some'at struck him in the side; the hurt's inward. I'm afraid ther's no chance, Richard."

"He gave his life for me, and I was tricking him! Oh, God!"

Inskip nodded gravely and worked on in silence. He believed God had dealt this blow direct on Dick and his mother. "It'll make a different man of him for life," he thought. He looked, now and again, over the inanimate body at the angry sea, the ominous sky and earth. To his uneducated and half-Pagan fancy, they were alive and vengeful. It was not the poor major, bravely dying, on whom their punishment had fallen, but the living trickster bending over him. For Inskip had stumbled on the great truth that he who would truly know love or nature must come to them as into the presence of God, with bare face and clean hands, and lips that would not lie.

The major breathed at last. But his mind was not clear. When his wife and daughter bent close to hear, they found he was laughing. "Newcastle," he said, and afterward —"The public's a donkey, Langton, and we—we lead—" Then he was silent. Presently he opened his eyes. They were clear and intelligent. "I am wet," he said. He took in with a glance his wife's face, the sea, the men kneeling over him. "Is this death?" looking quickly at Dort.

Dick raised him, his face as ghastly as the dying man's. "I fear it is, sir."

"Humph!" He did not speak for a little while. "Vaux & Sons—that's all done—done. Fanny!"

"I am here."

"If this is so," with an effort painful to see—"put on my gravestone, Joseph Fox. Fox. I took the name of Vaux. I thought it would be genteeler for the boys and

Romy. But I'd like to be buried under my own."

"Oh, father! father!"

"Romy"—fumbling at the cold hand in his—"you're a good girl, Romy. It is this stitch in my side, that—Fanny! Don't leave me, Fanny."

"I will not leave you."

The major nodded, contented, once or twice, and looking steadily into the poor, shallow face that had been so dear to him, he drew a quick breath or two, and then all was still.

The sun, which had been hidden all day, broke out from behind the cloud, and threw a sudden illumination over sea and land. Its red beams touched the poor dead body, as if God had stretched out loving hands and claimed something in it as His own. Old Inskip, laying it straight upon the sand, looked up to the glowing crimson glory and

the dark blue sea below, to the soft, crisp foam upon the beach, to the two figures standing apart, lovers for all time. It seemed to him as if the world was full of God's truth and love; as if every meanest of His creatures had its share in both.

"This, too!" he said, laying his trembling hand on the poor major's breast. "This, too."

THE END.

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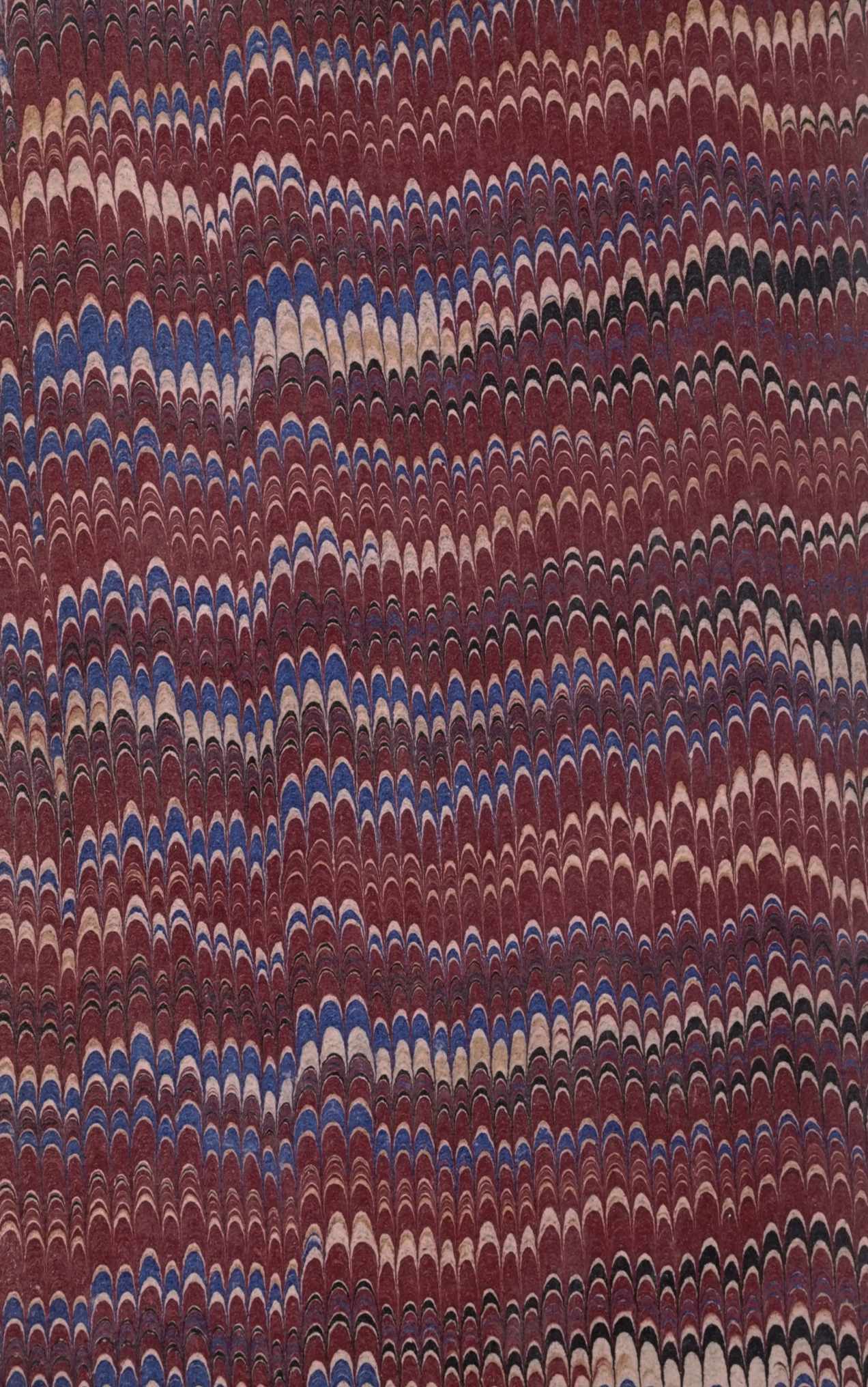

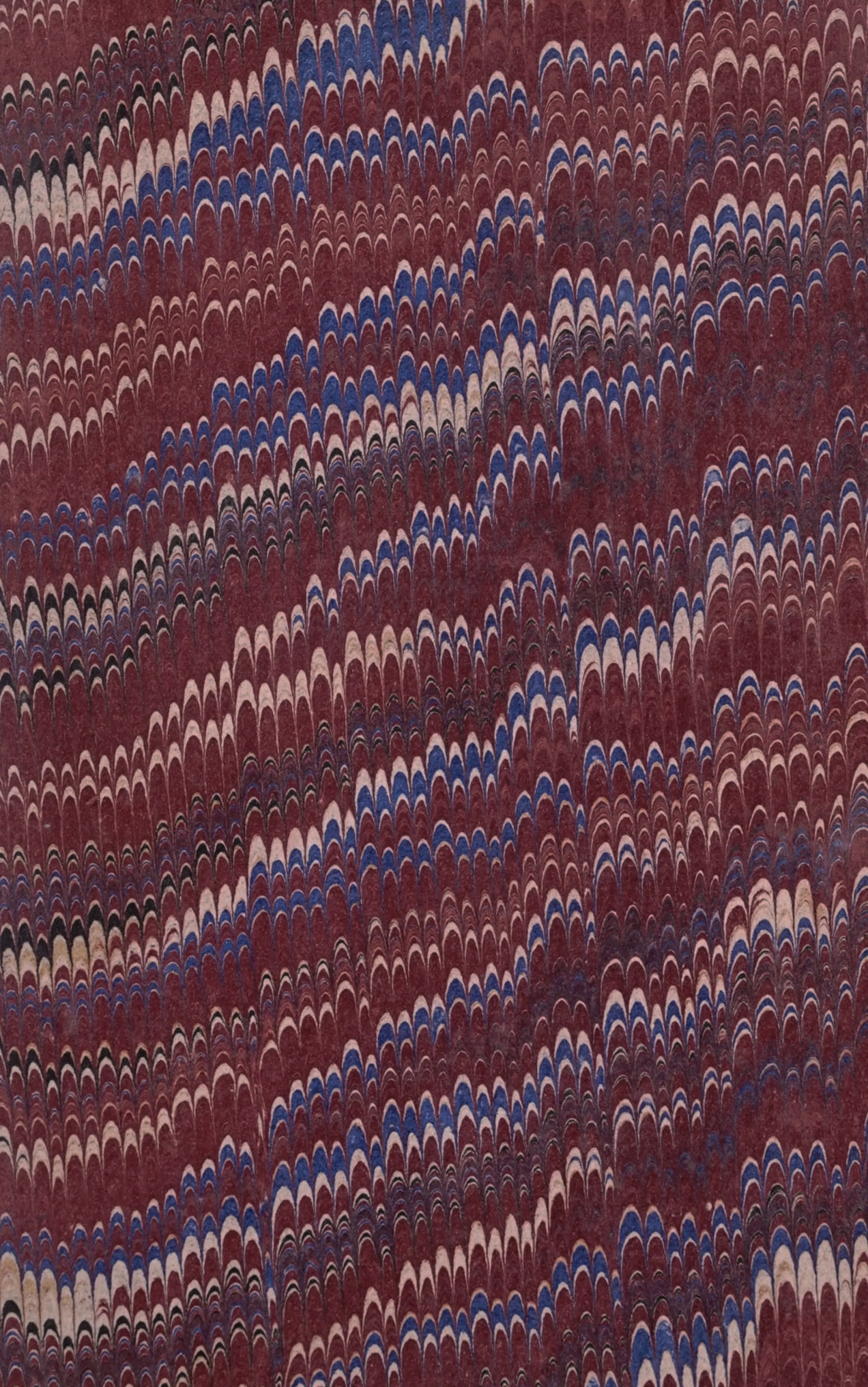

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